SANITARIUM

Bringing you the best in horror, one case at a time.

EYE TRAUMA PRESS

#026

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Welcome to the Sanitarium

If this is your first visit or your 26th, we welcome you and we hope you enjoy your stay. We have great stories and featured to keep you entertained.

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We See “Where the Horror Happens” with Jodi Renée Lester

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MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

ISSUE TWENTY SIX

Dear Reader,

Straight off the bat I would like to wish you all a Happy Halloween. Even for us Brits the holiday is getting bigger and bigger, with more haunts appearing in farmers' fields across the country to an excess of books, artwork and films hitting the market. It's a great time to be a horror fan.

The past few weeks have been a busy one at Sanitarium Magazine. We have showcased our magazine to the attendees at SCARdiff (and if you were one of those who picked up a flyer – welcome) and we took part in Coffin Hop 2014 and met some great friends at both.

This issue has a slightly different look and we will be building on this as we move forward to 2015 and the 30th issue. In these pages, we showcase 12 talented writers and their works in horror fiction and dark verse, we spend a moment with the team behind SCARdiff, along with news, reviews and a couple of killer interviews this is the perfect issue to come in on.

So settle down, pull up a chair and enjoy all that Sanitarium has to offer this Halloween.

Welcome to the Sanitarium

Barry Skelhorn
Editor

/Sanitariummagazine

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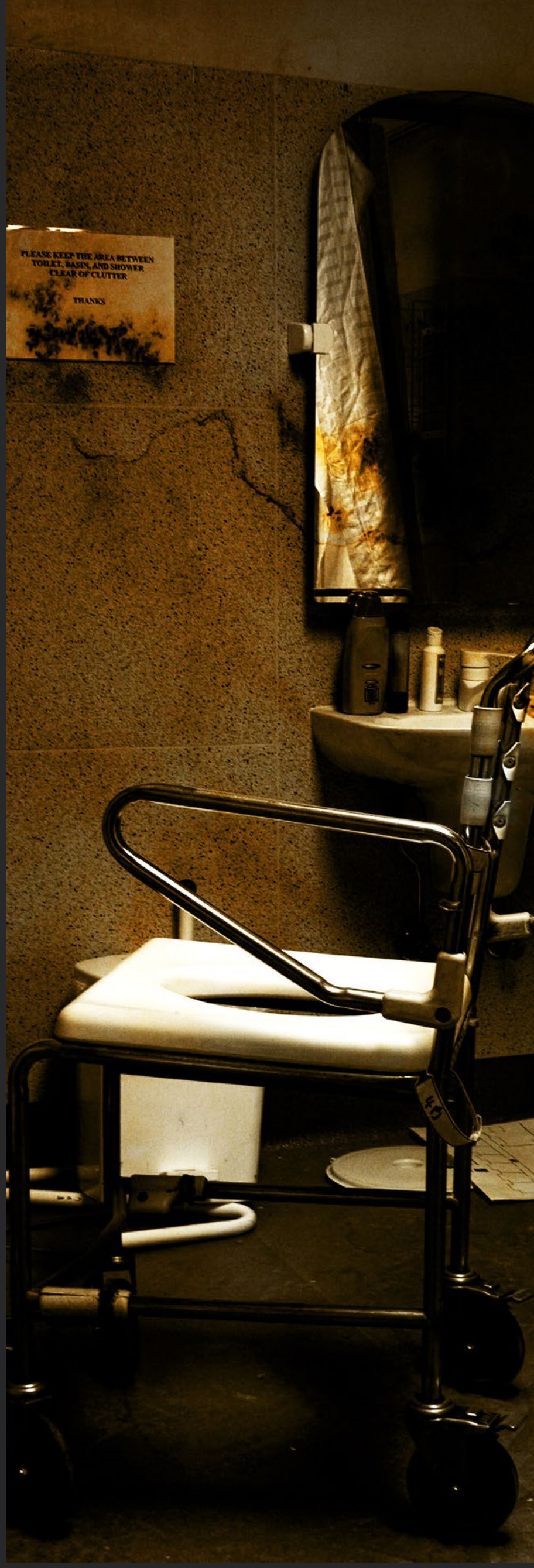


NEWS

Up and Coming Markets

WHISPERS FROM THE ABYSS VOLUME 2

We want authors hungry to play in the twisted universe envisioned by H.P. Lovecraft, or write tales that are in the spirit of his mythos. Like Lovecraftís own work, the horror in this anthology aims to be subtle and subjective. The mind and its inner working are a far more terrifying place than the actual corridors of Rílyeh or the Mountains of Madness.

Ideally this anthology should hit readers like a really good mix tape (or iMix for those of you too young to remember what a cassette is). We want a variety of styles, themes, and moods that hook the readers fast, creep the hell out of them, and leave them wanting more. Experimentation is highly encouragedñespecially unconventional narrative styles, meta-fiction, genre mash-ups, even sick humor. Of course, donít be afraid to stick with the tried and true ìravings of a madman,î if thatís your jones.

Deadline: May 30, 2015

Length: 2,500-4,500 words

Payment: 1 cent/word + digital contributor copy. Two print copies will be provided once the book is printed in 2016.

Submission Guidelines: http://01publishing.com/submissions/open-call-whispers-from-the-abyss-vol-2/

CURIOSITY QUILLS PRESS

Curiosity Quills Press is a publisher of hard-hitting dark sci-fi, speculative fiction, and paranormal works aimed at adults, young adults, and new adults.

Length: 15,000-120,000 words

Payment: Royalties on print & ebook sales + 5 free print copies

Submission Guidelines: https://curiosityquills.com/submission-guidelines/

FROM THE CORNER OF YOUR EYE: A CRYPTIDS ANTHOLOGY

Bigfoot.

Nessie.

The Jersey Devil.

Creatures moving in the twilight between fantasy and reality. Beasts that delight, mystify, and terrify. Cryptids are everywhere, in the water, running on the land, or even soaring overhead, challenging our faith in what science knows. From mermaids taunting our ships and Mexican goat suckers who feast on livestock (if weíre lucky) to the Jersey Devil soaring overhead, belief is only a blink away.

Deadline: January 31, 2015

Length: 3,000-8,000 words

Payment: $25 + contributor's copy

Submission Guidelines: http://www.greatoldonespublishing.com/submission-information/anthologies/from-the-corner-of-your-eye-a-cryptids-anthology/

SUNNY WITH A CHANCE OF ZOMBIES

Knightwatch Press are putting together a brand new zombie anthology, and we need your brains.

Sunny with a Chance Of Zombies is set for release in Summer 2015, and weíre looking to fill it with a collection of strangely uplifting stories to go with the lighter season.

Have you got what it takes to bring something new to the walking dead?

We want original ideas that defy the expectations of our readers. Surprise us with your settings, bring us some new or skewed perspectives, horrify us by all means, but above all make us smile.

Deadline: December 10, 2014

Length: 2,000-6,000 words

Payment: Royalties + eBook contributor copy

Submission Guidelines: http://www.scorchedflower.co.uk/knightwatch/submissions/

CURIOSITY QUILLS PRESS

What they want:

Curiosity Quills Press is a publisher of hard-hitting dark sci-fi, speculative fiction, and paranormal works aimed at adults, young adults, and new adults.

Length: 15,000-120,000 words

Payment: Royalties on print & ebook sales + 5 free print copies

Submission Guidelines: https://curiosityquills.com/submission-guidelines/

PLAYROOMS

Do you remember your childhood? Are all those memories happy ones? What about that creepy little doll that always seemed to be lying under your bedÖ the one that made you tuck your blanket around your feet so that it couldnít climb in during the night to GET you? Do you remember that as well? What about the scary old caretaker who shouted at you on your first day of schoolÖ what exactly was it that he didnít want you to see in the cleaning cupboard?

PLAYROOMS is an anthology where all childhood fears become real. Submissions should feature spaces associated with young children (bedrooms, tree houses, schools, nurseries, etc.) and/or toys, items, objects associated with childhood. Stories should also contain elements of the fantastical or supernatural. Let your fears run rampant with this!

Tales dealing with children suffering sexual assault in any manner are likely to be rejected. If something of this nature is integral to the plot of your story then proceed with extreme caution and tackle it as tastefully as possible. It is best avoided altogether.Deadline: May 1, 2015

Length: 3,000-6,000 words

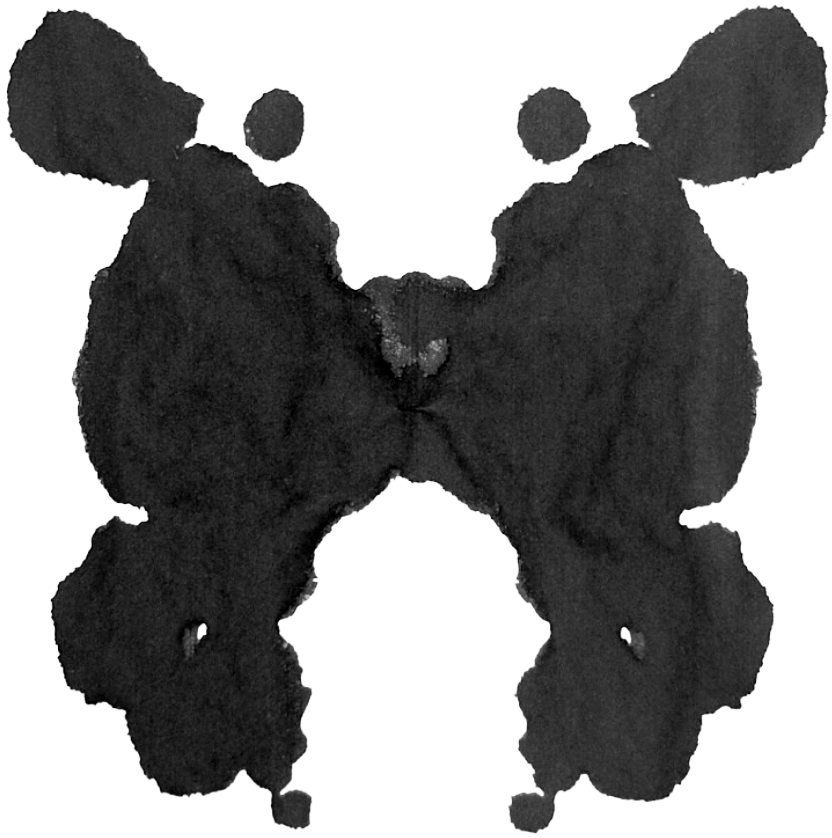
Payment: Royalties

Submission Guidelines: http://www.scorchedflower.co.uk/knightwatch/submissions/

Famous

Adam Koeth

Physician: Dr. Roundtree
8245-AVD12



CASE #70239

Famous

By Adam Koeth

HE LOOKED DOWN AT THE WOMAN LYING on the table. She moaned softly through the gag in her mouth, her eyelids fluttering, jittery, closed but moving in unconsciousness. He leaned down, leaned in close to her face, inhaling the scent of her perfume and the scent of her sweat. He decided her perfume was jasmine, maybe a hint of vanilla. The wildflower suffused with the salty tang of her sweat was not unpleasant, but the mixture nevertheless made his nose tingle. He stood upright before he could sneeze, rubbing the underside of his nose with one bony finger.

She was plain yet beautiful in her own way. He admired the hook of her nose, the smattering of freckles across her forehead and cheeks, the way her ears seemed to stick out just a little bit. She was self-conscious of the ears, he knew. When he introduced himself she fluffed her hair out to cover the ears, quite unconsciously, an ingrained habit unknown even to her. He touched one quivering finger to the hollow at the base of her throat and traced a line down her naked body, circling one of her small breasts before continuing to her belly button, her hip, her thigh and, finally, her foot. He didn't particularly care for feet, thought they were the ugliest part of a woman's body, but he nevertheless lingered on the soft arch of her foot, tracing the wrinkles with his yellowing nail. He playfully tickled her foot. The woman jerked and moaned again. He giggled.

The grandfather clock upstairs chimed once, the sound muffled by the door at the top of the basement stairs. The door was reinforced with several locks and a security rod propped against the door handle, but he knew there was little chance it would stand up against a determined effort by the police. The clock chimed again, reminding him that this time was different. This time there was a time limit. This time. The last time.

He put on his best smile, trying to look as harmless as possible before patting the woman softly on the cheek. She stirred but didn't wake, so he patted her again, harder. Her eyelids

fluttered, opening for a brief moment before closing again. She whimpered. He drew his hand back and lashed out at her face, his liver-spotted hand connecting with a vicious crack. Her head rocked sideways even as her eyes flew open. His smile faltered for a moment, but only for a moment, the effort of the slap pulling his mouth into a snarl. He didn't like it when they didn't wake up right away. Waking them was a waste of energy, especially now that he was an octogenarian. He didn't have a whole lot of energy left these days.

She seemed confused as she looked up at him, then around the room. She tried to sit up but the straps around her wrists and ankles prevented her from hovering more than an inch above the table. Her eyes grew wide when she spotted the nearby workbench and the shiny metallic implements laying neatly atop its surface. She began to scream through the gag.

"Shh," he cooed softly, placing one finger across his thin, graying lips. When she continued to scream he reached over to the workbench, selected a small scalpel, and pointed it down at one of her watering eyes. Her beautiful, hazel eyes. For a moment he became lost in the depth of her eyes, swam through the tears rolling down her cheek, landed on her cracked lips. The scalpel trembled in his hand as his mind explored the inside of her mouth, her tongue, her throat. He fell into the darkness, slipped into her body, became her. He could feel her fear, reveled in her panic. He loved it. He loved her.

Her muffled scream brought him back to his own frail body. A deep sadness overcame him when he realized he could never really be her, could never be young again. Could never be beautiful like her. The sadness was joined by physical pain, aching in his joints and bones, a dull throbbing behind his rheumy eyes. One leg slightly shorter than the other. Inches of height lost over the years, until he stooped at a mere five and a half feet tall, where once he stood straight and proud at almost six feet. Tufts of thick, white hair protruded from both his ears and nose while the hair atop his head thinned away to almost nothing. Teeth stained a grim yellow after sixty years of smoking. Liver spots. Shaking. Heart palpitations.

Adult diapers.

"Enough," he said, the scalpel mere centimetres from her pupil. "Enough of that. I hate to sound cliché, but nobody will hear you down here. So enough."

She quieted, the scream dying on her lips. He smiled and pulled the scalpel away from her eye, placed it back on the workbench between the bone saw and the dental scaler. He enjoyed the gleam of the room's bright lights on his tools and spent most of his days polishing them to a high shine. As old age crept up on his friends, the grave pulling them in one by one, his tools remained, silent but always present. In a way, he decided, his tools were even better listeners than most of his old friends. He patted the scalpel lovingly before turning back to the woman on his table.

"Now. Aimee, was it?" She looked up at him with wild eyes, her chest heaving. "Allie? Annie? Eh," he concluded, waving a hand in the air. "It doesn't matter. Not to me, at least. I usually try to learn the names, but at this point…" He drifted off, his mind wandering back to his first. Luanne. Luanne Reed. 1959. Pretty, plain like Aimee/Allie/Annie, smart as a whip and very religious. He had watched her for several weeks, noting the swirl of her skirt as she bounded down the steps of St. Ignatius High School, the way her amber hair seemed lighter or darker depending on the time of day or how much the sun was shining. The shy, tentative way she held hands with her boyfriend, the way her eyes darted to the side when the boy looked at her. The small silver cross that hung on a chain around her neck. The small silver cross that now sat at the bottom of a large, velvet-lined box underneath his workbench.

1959, on the cusp of Kennedy's Camelot, years before the Civil Rights movement came to a head. Now, 2014. An African-American man in the White House. Fifty-five years. Four times that many women come and gone from his table. And here, the last one.

"I want you to know that you're going to be famous," he said, leaning over the woman's prone body. She recoiled as his face came nearer to hers. "You and me both, I suppose. One of the greatest serial killers in American history," he continued, sitting down on the edge of the table. Very slowly, with tremendous effort, he swung his entire body onto the table and straddled the woman's hips, his flaccid member brushing against her belly. She strained against her

bonds then, trying to get away from him, from his wrinkly, ugly, naked body. He stretched out on top of her and caressed her face with one hand. “And his last victim.”

He lay on top of her for a time that seemed to stretch into forever, the trembling of her body matching the shaking of his own. He wanted to be in her again, wanted to tumble into her darkness and feel her fear again, but this time nothing came except the hot breath leaking out from around the gag and the feeling of her tears against his cheek. He absently wondered if her tears would somehow revive his skin, push the liver spots down, smooth his wrinkles and turn the stubble there from spectral white back to the jet black of his youth. He laughed aloud, and the woman jumped beneath him.

“Well,” he whispered into her ear, “We should probably get started. We’re going to have visitors soon, and I want you to look presentable when they arrive.” Gently, slowly, painfully, he slipped back to the floor, the balls of his bare feet instantly chilling against the cool concrete. He had called the police himself, told the dispatcher exactly what she would least like to hear: that he had a woman imprisoned in his basement, that he was going to vivisect her. That he was the Buckeye Butcher.

He inspected his tools, picked up the scalpel again, admired his reflection for a brief moment. Suicide by cop, they called it on the news. Not a bad way to go. Better than rotting in a prison cell or dying in a hospital bed with tubes stuffed down your throat. He kissed the tip of the sharp knife, turned, smiled sadly.

“I love you, Luanne. I always will.”

***

When he had finished, he shuffled up the stairs to the basement door. He stood there, his body splattered red from head to toe, listening to the police creep through his home. It took him a few moments to undo the locks; his fingers, wet with blood and gristle, kept slipping away from the little bolts. The security bar sat behind him, propped up against the wall. He leaned against the wall himself, a dripping carving knife clasped in one hand, and waited.

From the other side of the door he heard quiet but heavy footsteps. They moved through the kitchen before splitting apart, with one set heading away from the basement, into the dining room. The other pair came closer, became louder, until they stopped altogether. He could hear the officer breathing. Rough, ragged breaths through the nose. The door handle trembled slightly as the officer took it in his hand. It turned. The door swung inward.

The man launched himself with a roar, mustering every ounce of energy his elderly body could gather, the carving knife cocked back to deliver a blow to the officer’s head. He saw a bright flash, brighter than anything he had ever seen, and heard a massive roar through the bunched, white hair in his ears.

After that, nothing.

The End.

Adam Koeth

Details Not Released at this Time

Zombie Run

Kim Culpepper

Physician: Dr. Peterson
8268-WCT29

CASE #83398

Zombie Run

By Kim Culpepper

BOB MCCALLISTER TIED HIS BLACK RUNNING SHOES one last time. He was preparing for his final practice run before the big zombie 5K fun run coming up over the weekend. His first zombie themed run made him excited to see how he would fare against his overly competitive wife. She had ventured out earlier to get a head start and take in the clear, crisp morning air. Bob was smarter. The thicker the heat the better as they would be running in the hottest part of the summer in Mississippi.

He ran his skinny white fingers through the thicket of grey hair atop his head and smiled at himself in the bathroom mirror. He knew he had her. He just knew it. He pet his Golden Retriever Foster and stretched slightly before heading out.

He opened the door to find a horrific sight. Foster had captured another bird and made it his late night snack. He gasped at the sight of its beak barely hanging off of what was left of its mushed in skull. Feathers lay throughout the front sidewalk where he had undoubtedly played with it like a toy.

Bob looked back at Foster who continued to hassle and watch as if nothing was wrong.

He kicked the tiny bird's body over into the bushes and slammed the front door behind him. He let out a heavy sigh as he was tired of finding Foster's little presents every morning. He glanced down at his running shoes and noticed a tiny drop of bird blood on his white and black running shoes.

"Damn dog." He said aloud to the morning. His neighbor gave him the evil eye for his wordy expression and hurried into his car. He sped away, still staring back at Bob. "Damn neighbor."

He stuck his earphones into his ears and started to jog in place. Breathing in and out heavily, he closed his eyes to embrace the heat. A tap on his shoulder broke his concentration and he yanked his headphones out of his ears, disrupting the constant beats of the Black Eyed Peas.

His wife Nicole stood in front of him smiling with barely a bead of sweat atop her young forehead. Her blonde hair had been pulled tight into a ponytail and her bright pink running shoes made his head twinge with pain. He rolled his eyes at her, expecting her brag of how much younger she was than him and how she would beat him at tomorrow's 5K.

"I did it Bob." She said through a smile. "I ran the full 5K already. Have you yet?"

"No I am just getting started." Bob said. He rolled his eyes at her enthusiasm.

"This isn't a competition. We are going to do this together if I have to push you across that finish line."

"You won't have to push me across. I'm 54 years old. You act like I'm elderly." Bob said, raising his voice only slightly. He kept the anger of her constant teasing deep inside. He wouldn't let her see the hate that had built up since they were married only 3 years ago. She could have had anyone she wanted at 23 but she chose to be with Bob.

"Calm down old man. Don't want to give yourself a heart attack." She said. She skipped through the bird feathers that Foster had carelessly left behind from last night and went inside their two-story Tudor home without a second thought.

Bob gritted his teeth and went for his run.

***

The day of the run was like any other, except it was overcast and the locals had been treated with a cold front, leaving the usual stifling heat of the South down to pleasant temperatures and overcast skies. The run that Nicole had been preparing for was lining up to be a perfect match to her morning runs. Bob's practicing was not as commended.

He gritted his teeth and smiled his smiles at her. She held his hand on the ride up the long strip of highway that had been blocked from traffic and done up to look as if a zombie apocalypse had come through it. Most of the runners were already at the starting line by the time they had parked their car and locked it up.

"Hurry up Bob. Geez." Nicole demanded.

"I don't want to overstretch myself. You learn not to with every run."

"Hogwash! It's because you're old."

Her words cut him like a knife. He gritted his teeth and swore divorce by the time they had reached their starting points. They received their running numbers and Bob began to limber up.

He was amazingly fit for an older man. He never considered himself any older than his thoughts.

He had been kicking himself ever since their wedding day. That's when the verbal abuse started. If she wasn't calling him an old man then she was calling him grey, too tall, or too skinny for his height. He remained happy, according to everyone around him that constantly laughed at her jokes towards him.

Her jokes had worn thin and his teeth were tired of being gritted.

"Nikki! Hurry up. I saved a spot for you and your old man right next to me." A bouncy brunette

with big breasts said as she bounced over to Nicole to hug her tightly. Bob ogled his wife's friend's assets. "Eyes up here you grey fox you."

Nicole slapped Bob over the shoulder. He gave no reaction as they giggled and ran ahead of him.

He stayed behind towards the end of the crowd of running participants. He could see the flag preparing to be dropped for the beginning of the race. He stretched out his legs in preparation.

The flag was dropped and all of the people ahead of him took off running without incident. He could see the back of Nicole's blonde head bouncing as she ran alongside her busty brunette friend. He despised the back of her head. That's all he ever saw each night they went to bed together. Not even a good night's kiss would be had from her. He gritted his teeth again. This time to the point of pain.

The pretend zombies were constantly trying to grab at him but he avoided them easily. The fake blood and the pasty white makeup made them look like kids out for candy on Halloween night. The thought of youth would normally make him smile in remembrance of his own

average childhood but not today. Today was different. Today he felt vengeful. Today he was hungry for a better than sub-standard life he had been living up until this point. Today would be the day he would tell Nicole he wanted her out of his life.

His steps quickened and his heart leaped for joy at his new found decision. His breathing hastened and his arms pulled him along faster. He passed up runner after runner until he could see her jogging at a relaxed pace just a few feet from him. He reached his arm out to her shoulder before he got even close to her. It was as if his arm were pulling him to run quicker.

He touched her shoulder and she turned back to look at him with complete surprise. Almost tripping over her own two feet she said, "What?"

She slowed her jog down to a power walk and he joined up beside her. The other runners gained momentum over them both and they were left behind. Her brunette friend passed them by with a wave and a smile.

"Great." She said through labored breaths. "Now we have to run double to catch back up. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Bob calmed his breathing and managed to whisper, "I want a divorce."

Nicole laughed. Her cackling overcome his breathing and the anger within him rose like a fist. He gnashed his teeth and his nails dug into his own skin. The laughter not only hurt his ears but her shrill voice made every bone in his body screech to a halt. They stopped their walking for her amusement.

Bob looked around for pretend zombies but saw none. They were alone on a small stretch of the desolate road.

He grabbed her blonde ponytail and jerked her down to the ground. Her chortling came to a screeching halt as she fell.

"What the hell Bob?" she yelled up to him.

He climbed atop of her and held her down to the ground. The black pavement dug into his knees as he struggled to keep her despondent. She clawed her manicured hands up at him. He smiled as she dug into the skin on his face.

"You crazy fuck. Get off of me!" she begged.

He released his hold on her shoulders and took her head into his hands. He banged her head into the concrete until her eyes seemed distant and her body stopped struggling. He let go and looked down at his hands. The red that covered them looked like strawberry syrup in the bright Mississippi sunlight. He licked one finger to taste her. She never let him taste her.

He banged her head some more until his fingers were snug inside her scalp. He pulled at the hair and flesh covering it to reveal the cracked skull underneath. He chipped away at the bone as if he were pulling away the shell from a hardboiled egg. The prize underneath lay there for consumption. He grabbed up a handful and chewed the brain like cotton candy. He smiled with every bite, letting the blood drip carelessly from his lips.

The rest of her body looked bare and void of any imperfections. She had obviously worked very hard to keep it that way just for him to never be able to touch it. He would touch it today as much as he wanted. Her lifeless body had become the submissive wife he had thought he married. He dug his teeth down into the soft flesh of her thigh until the warm blood beneath filled his mouth. He drank it in without remorse and tore open a new wound.

The muscle underneath looked new and untouched by anyone. He imagined his own thighs would not look as fresh underneath his rugged skin. He dug in and enjoyed the feel of her flesh between his teeth. He gazed down at his running gear and beamed in the afterglow of his innovative kill. He knew why Foster enjoyed bringing home his furry victims every night.

He stood up over her body and outstretched his arms in true pretend zombie style and began to moan like the rest of them. He stumbled forward and shuffled slightly faster than the rest of the group he had passed earlier. He topped a hill and could see how far ahead the other runners had gotten to. He ran to catch up with them, passing the other pretend zombies as he went. The look on their faces made him smile. It was a look of disgust. He wondered if they were jealous of his authentic look.

His teeth would be gritted no more as he savored the remainder of Nicole's flesh between them.

The End....

Kim Culpepper

Kim Culpepper is a horror writer who has published several short stories and flash fiction pieces in literary magazines, blogs, and websites. She lives in Columbus, MS and has 2 children. You can purchase her debut novel, The Blood Talisman, on Amazon or Smashwords. She is currently working on the second book in The Blood Talisman series which will be available in 2015. Follow her on Twitter @kculpepper1 or go to her website: www.kjculpepper.net

Jack Milan and the Voice in his Head

Carl Thompson

Physician: Dr. Lotherton
8715-AED19

CASE #63363

Jack Milan and the Voice in his Head

By Carl Thompson

"I HEAR ECHOES OF THINGS" SAID JACK MILAN. "WHISPERS."

Doctor Rahman lifted his torch and leaned in close to Jack's left ear, so close that Jack could smell his breakfast.

"When did this start, Jack?" Rahman's voice was elegant and light; unlike the other voice.

"A week ago. I thought it might have been an insect, crawled in and got trapped. But then it became obvious it wasn't just in one ear. So unless the insect has tunnelled through and out the other side, or has a twin with the same aim, then I know it isn't an insect."

Rahman let go of Jack's ear, sat back and swivelled round on his chair, and continued his examination with the other ear.

"Plus which, it isn't making scratching sounds, burrowing sounds. I can't feel legs, I can't feel teeth. I can just hear... noise. Words."

The doctor switched off his torch, and heeled himself backwards towards his desk. "Your canals are clear. No sign of damage, no scarring. And clean. Very clean."

"That's because I bathed them for a week when I first heard the sound. Until I realised there was no point."

Rahman clicked his pen, on and off, on and off. "What words, exactly, do you think you can hear?"

"At first I couldn't make them out. The sound, it seemed to begin at a great distance, as if someone was yelling from a mountain top, and then suddenly turn to a whisper, as quiet as a voice could be, as close as a mouth could be, only to echo again from a mile away. It sounds like a fast car, passing, or a violin mimicking a swarm of bees. I do know this much. It is the sound of deceit. The sound of malice. The sound of despair."

Rahman dropped his forehead and his pince-nez slid down his nose. "What words, Jack? What malice? What deceit?"

Jack smiled, though there was no pleasure behind the grin. "That's the thing. I can never

remember what is said. As soon as I hear, as soon as I have some comprehension, I forget. That is the deceit. Whoever is talking, they take their words with them. And when the voice has gone, I am wracked with deadly intent. That is the malice. He leaves me not the words, but the thoughts, most devilish thoughts, as clear as if I had spoken them myself."

Rahman clicked his pen once more, but now he used it, inking spider-like scrawl onto his dog-eared pad. "Could it be that these words, they aren't actually being said, Jack? That there is another explanation? Is it possible that these words are indeed your own? That you may be hearing your inner voice?"

Jack shook his head, a slow shake, a defeated shake. "It isn't my voice. It is a voice unlike mine, or yours. When he speaks to me, his noise fills my head like the roll of thunder, yet his words have the clarity of a church bell. Like the voice of someone who has lived forever. It is not my voice, I can assure you."

Rahman sat back in his chair and intertwined his long fingers. "Are you getting enough sleep, Jack?"

"No. Not since last week. Not since the voice."

"You eating?"

"Not really. Everything has changed"

"Everything?"

"Yeah. Everything. I quit my job. I quit my house. I quit Lorrie."

"You left Lorraine?"

"Yep. I don't want to hurt anyone, especially not those I love." Jack's voice began to crack. "I just want the voice to go away."

Rahman paused before answering to give Jack a moment to compose himself. "Ok, help me to help you Jack. How do you think we are going to get rid of the voice?"

Jack leaned forward. Rahman waited for him to talk, his pen held in mid air, fixated on Jack's heavily stubbled jaw.

"You gotta catch it."

Rahman shook his head, jutting out his wet bottom lip. "How are we going to do that, Jack?"

"Record it. Mic me up. I need to know what is being said to me. I need to know what he wants."

"And if we do that, and we don't hear anything? Then what?"

Jack put his hand on Rahman's pinstripe sleeve. "Then you can take me away. Lock me up. For my own good."

"I don't think that would be necessary Jack."

"I do, doctor. I most certainly do."

Rahman raised his eyebrows. "Ok, Jack. I haven't got the equipment to do that here, but I can get it. Make an appointment with Irene. I'll see you in a week. We'll see what your 'voice' has got to say."

"Thanks" said Jack, as he rose. "Just one thing, though. It will have to be an evening appointment. You see, he only talks to me at night."

***

The voice knows, thought Jack, as he left the surgery. ***He knows the plan.*** On the train ride home he thought he heard the voice, but it was just a wino or bum haranguing him. In the street he thought he heard it again, but it was the rush of the wind through the trees. With each step a new sound seemed to echo the voice; the start of a car, the howl of a dog, the cry of a wronged child.

When he arrived back at his apartment, he hung up his overcoat and poured himself a glass of water, and sat down in his threadbare armchair. He then took a pencil and a pad and sat them down next to him, on Rahman's advice, in the hope that he may collect the words of the voice through some kind of automatic writing, a task he knew would prove fruitless. ***Because the voice knows.***

In the first few days after he had heard the voice he had tried to stop himself from listening, to fill any silence with sound. He had taken to turning on the radio, thinking it may prove a distraction or even drown it out somehow, but it never did; it could never be as intimate, as

deafeningly loud. Instead the radio acted as an insidious harbinger, seemingly summoning forth the voice, a broadcast for Jack's ears alone. He had left the home he shared with his wife on subsequent nights hoping the noise of the city would prove diversion enough; instead his dread grew with every corner turned; and the voice still came.

Now Jack simply listened.

While he waited, Jack collected a few of his own thoughts, just a handful, on how the voice had changed his life. He now preferred silence and solitude to the company of men, or women. Though he knew he would miss Lorraine badly, and though she called on him a couple of times in floods of tears, not once did he regret the decision to leave, which in truth the voice had made on his behalf. And though he knew, eventually, the voice would have to leave him, he would, in some small way, be sorry to never hear it again.

Just as he was beginning to tire, his eyes closing, his lids heavy, he heard it; the voice, galloping in from the edge of sanity. He scrambled for the pencil, but in his haste knocked it from his side table. Jack couldn't see the pencil beneath his feet, and so climbed from the chair, and onto the floor, accompanied as he did so by a distant, rolling chant, a tunnelling mantra. He saw the pencil underneath the chair, and so stretched out an arm to claim it. He could hear the close breath of the voice, the sharp inhalations and gargling exhalations and so he knew he had to be quick. Picking up the pencil, and pulling himself back onto the chair, he waited, listening for the voice to once again speak.

With a gigantic intake of air, the voice unleashed its decibels. Rather than wince, Jack's eyes widened, filling with tears, and his body began to shake. Fixing his stare ahead and not downwards towards the pad, he felt his fingers direct the pencil to scrawl upon the paper. For a full ten seconds the voice spoke, or rather bellowed from afar, and then stopped, following an utterance of moth-like delicacy, of soul-like proximity. Jack continued to shake for a further minute, knowing he had written something on the pad, but not daring to see what it was. When he did eventually look down through half-closed moist eyes, he recognised the hand, but not the meaning of the jumbled letters, half words and hieroglyphs assembled on the page before him.

He dropped the pencil again, but this time didn't attempt to pick it up. ***Only one more week, that's all you've got,*** he thought. ***One more week, then we'll know the truth.***

Jack tried the same exercise the following evening. He sat and suffered the howls and moans and insinuations, and his hand responded by dragging the pencil meaninglessly across the paper. He was growing impatient, and the closer the day arrived, the more unsure of himself he became. On the fourth, after another unsuccessful attempt to transcribe the voice's awful howl, he gave up. He rang Rahman, trying to bring forward his appointment, but the doctor could not be contacted. He tore up the pad, snapped the pencil, and put paid to the idea that he could make lasting sense of the nightly utterances.

***

When the time finally came around for him to visit the doctor, he hadn't slept for the previous three nights, nor had he eaten, his last meal a bowl of soup seventy two hours ago. He had taken in water, and tea, and on the third night brandy, which made him wretch, such was the knotted tension inside him.

"Jack!" Rahman quietly exclaimed, when he entered the dim surgery. "You look dreadful."

Jack nodded, and sat down. "I know" was all he could muster, rubbing his cold hands together. He gestured towards the wall clock above Rahman's head which read seven thirty. "It feels strange being here at this time."

Rahman nodded. "It seems strange to me too."

Jack frowned, but his frown quickly disappeared when he saw a tape machine beneath a host of black wires on the desk behind Rahman.

"You have the equipment."

Rahman nodded, half turning. "It's fairly rudimentary, but it will do. Before we start though, Jack, I wondered whether you got…"

"Nothing. I wrote nothing down. I heard the voice every night. Every night it came to me, every night it wailed. Each night I took a paper and pencil, and I tried to write what was said.

Each time I would understand, I would know what the voice had said, yet in the same instant I would forget. I gave up, Doctor Rahman. I'm sorry, but I became so frustrated I wanted to die."

Rahman raised an eyebrow, and handed Jack a watch-like device from a drawer in his desk. "Before we get started I want you to put this on."

"What is it?"

"A heart monitor. I want to see how this is affecting your health."

"Just look at me" Jack replied as he rolled up his sleeve. "That tells you all you need to know."

Rahman lifted the equipment from behind him and placed it onto his desk, between himself and Jack.

"Ok. Let me explain how this works. Basically it's a kind of microphone which you put in each ear, like a hearing aid. They are connected to this external recording device. I plug in a pair of headphones, and that allows me to hear everything you hear to the minutest detail. Every reverberation of your ear drum, from this conversation, to the pulse of your blood. So, if the voice is real, and you hear it, this machine will record it, and I'll hear it too.

Jack lifted the black box from the table. "So you borrowed this from the secret service, is that what you're telling me?"

"You'd be surprised" replied Rahman, taking the machine from Jack and carefully positioning it back on the table. "The microphones are extremely sensitive, so it absolutely vital that we both remain silent during the recording. You need to regulate your breathing, and I'll do the same. Try to limit your movements. If you want to communicate with me, write it down." Rahman slid an A4 pad across the desk, and a pen.

Jack nodded.

"And, I know you've already tried, but I want you to try once more, to write down anything you hear, comprehensible or not."

Rahman gently pulled Jack's arm towards him, investigating the heart monitor. "Ok. We're ready. Once you have the earpieces in place I'll begin recording. Any questions before we start."

"No" Jack replied, lifting the earpieces from the table.

"Good. Relax Jack, if you can. I want you to indicate to me that you hear a small popping sound when I raise my hand, ok?"

Rahman flicked a small chrome switch on the side of the machine. Jack heard the sound, and nodded. Rahman lowered his hand, put his finger to his lips, and then leaned back in his chair. Jack sat upright, his hands flat on the desk, his immediate thoughts; ***What if the voice does not wish to be heard by anyone other than me? Will Rahman even admit it, if he does hear the voice? Can Rahman even hear my thoughts?*** But he knew Rahman expected nothing. With his downward smile, closed eyes and oversized headphones he had the appearance of someone preparing to nod off to the shipping forecast or an unremarkable symphony.

The two men sat like this for an hour, in silence.

Jack's gaze fell upon the contents of the room. He had never noticed the décor on his regular visits; daylight simply highlighted its apparent clinical sterility; but with the blinds fully drawn the room looked different when lit by nothing more than the lamp upon the desk. Now it appeared far more intriguing, sinister even, the stethoscopes and medicine cabinets and bookcases only vaguely visible amongst the shadows. Most alarming of all was the skeleton in the corner to Jack's right, which seemed to sway and move in the half light. Perhaps he would hear the voice too, thought Jack.

He turned to Rahman, and raised his hand. Rahman removed his headphones, and flicked a chrome switch on the recorder.

"What is it Jack?"

"You do know it's unpredictable, don't you? The voice I mean."

"It comes to you every night though, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"That's predictable enough for me."

Jack shifted in his chair. "I just mean, I can't summon it. It comes when it wants."

Rahman smiled. "That's ok Jack. We have plenty of time."

Jack's eyes widened.

"Is that it", Rahman asked.

"Yep. That's it."

Rahman smiled again, placed his headphones on, and sat back in his chair.

A further hour passed. Rahman occasionally turned his foot left and right, but otherwise remained silent and stationary. Meanwhile Jack had begun to shift and fidget, feeling thirsty, and hot, his shirt damp with sweat, sticking to the back of his chair. Once again he held up his hand.

"What Jack?" asked Rahman after taking what seemed an age to remove his headphones, and switch off the machine.

"Can I have some water?"

Rahman looked around the room. "From the sink?"

"Yeah. If that's all there is."

Rahman took a plastic cup with a thimble-like capacity, and half filled it. "There you go."

Jack gulped the water down, and handed the cup back."Thanks."

"You know we don't have to do this Jack" Rahman said, standing over Jack. "If you're not up to it, I mean."

"No, we have to. We must. I want to."

"How will you react if we do not hear anything? You seem to be resolved to this, and I cannot help but think you will be disappointed."

Jack slapped his palm on the desk. "I have only this. This or madness; and I am not yet ready to succumb to that thought. Please. Can we continue?."

Rahman returned to his seat. "I am happy to go on Jack, for the moment. Shall we give it another hour?"

"Yes" replied Jack. "Thank you doctor."

Where are you? Jack thought. ***Where are you?*** But the voice did not answer. Jack tried to empty his mind, to remove all possible thoughts and distractions, imagining himself clearing a path for the voice to come through. He wanted to bring the voice to life and so gave it a face, and a name; but the features were fluid, never constant, ever changing, unrecognisable, and the name instantly forgotten as a result.

Time passed; it never stopped, no matter how much he tried to make it. Rahman remained stoical while Jack twitched, his eyes focused on Rahman and then unfocused as they sought the heavy medical books in their groaning cabinets, the collection of silver syringes and stethoscopes and other medical levers and pulleys and mantraps, and the mad, dancing skeleton in the corner; but the voice never came.

Rahman looked at his watch; Jack's eyes searched for the hiding wall clock. Ten thirty. Time ***has*** passed. The doctor sat upright and stifled a yawn. Mid yawn, his eyes widened, reacting to Jack's terrible stare.

The voice came to Jack from further away than ever before, not from a distant mountain range, or from the depths of the ocean floor, but from somewhere much deeper; somewhere ancient, somewhere ***primeval***. The rumble was not that of galloping horses but the noise of creation, of the eternal fires, of everything born from nothing. Jack could not explain its magnitude, because it was unfathomable. He could only hear.

Rahman leaned forward. "Is this the voice?" he mouthed.

Jack nodded. Rahman listened intently, but could not hear anything. Yet for Jack, the voice began to gradually intensify, reverberating from one ear to the next, flooding his brain, the blood draining from his face as his fear grew in expectation of the aural assault he would soon be subjected to. He pointed a finger at Rahman's headphones and raised his brow in desperate hope, but the doctor shook his head; yet as he did so, his own countenance altered.

Rahman heard ***something***. He couldn't quite determine what, so he pressed his headphones closer to his ears. Indeed there was something, however something minimal, something reticent. He reached over and turned the speaker to full volume. A gnawing, static fuzz filled his ears and he winced. The static was loud, but there was this something else, this something more. Was it a rattle? A rumble? A roar?

"You hear it!" yelled Jack. "I know you can!"

Rahman nodded. The sound was getting louder, like approaching thunder, gaining greater clarity with each decibel rise.

Now it was no longer a rumble. Now it was a voice. The beginning and end of words became

distinguishable, the rise and fall in tone, and though consonants and vowels were still difficult to interpret, one thing was clear; there was a message to be heard.

Rahman reached for the volume control, yet when he turned the dial the noise did not abate. Instead the sound intensified, the caterwaul drilling into his head, causing him to shudder, to rip the headphones from his ears.

Rahman's jaw fell open. He expected the noise to disappear, to be contained within the speakers, captured by the recording equipment, imprisoned within spools of tape and a mesh of metal and wires and loops of rubber, but it wasn't. Instead it peeled from the walls and ceiling, reverberated through the chair he sat upon, and the table he sat behind.

"I told you!" screamed Jack against the wall of noise, ripping out his earphones. 'I told you, but you didn't believe me! Now I will not be alone!"

I. The first word formed in the air around them, beginning as a growl and ending as feedback. Both men looked up to the ceiling, and then at each other.

I am.

"I am!" Jack called to Rahman. "That's what it said! Did you hear it?"

Rahman could only nod, pressing his hands to his ears if only to protect them from the sonic boom that followed each vowel.

I am returned.

To Rahman the room seemed to vibrate, not just the walls or the furniture, but the air, and the space and the time, shaking, rattling like an earthquake. He staggered from his seat and fell backwards into a wall, scattering his notebooks across the room, the listening equipment crashing upon the floor. All the while Jack remained seated, grinning maniacally, as the voice spoke to them thus:

I am returned to raise an army! He was the first, now you are the second! You will bring me a thousand more! I am returned to raise an army! He was the first, now you are the second! You will bring me a thousand more! I am returned to raise an army! He was the first, now you are the second! You will bring me a thousand more! I am returned to raise an army! He was the first, now you are the second! You will bring me a thousand more!

The End.

Carl Thompson

Carl P. Thompson is a much troubled, much travelled, now Glasgow-based author. After a profligate youth spent reading and dreaming, ruefully he threw his empty pen into a deep, dank fountain; but still he made a wish. Many, many years later, he found his pen again, floating in the gutter, now filled with a very different kind of ink…

His short 'The War Effort' was included in 'The Tenth Black Book of Horror' (Mortbury Press), and he is currently working on a number of new short stories and a full length novel. He has also had a (non-horror) piece included in that fine London-based literary magazine 'Open Pen', as Carl Thompson (the devil is in the detail…)

For what it may be worth, Carl can be followed on Twitter @rivethead666

My Son

James Tagliabue

Physician: Dr. Lichten
6428-SED41

CASE #73111

My Son

By James Tagliabue

MY SON IS GURGLING OUT TO ME FROM THE SINK in the bathroom, he wants food, but I'm in one of my ambivalent moods. The urge to squash him returns every month or so. I have no idea what his insides would look like but I imagine if I were to squish him then his filmy, translucent skin would split apart and a spermy white fluid would flow out, leaving behind an obscene sight, something like a used condom. I have never be able to understand how he works but it could be like an ant colony: thousands, perhaps millions of tiny brains coming together to form one much more intelligent Gestalt structure. However it is that he functions, he makes my stomach turn every time I look at him.

It began when I was 12 years old; I had diverged from my usual habit of walking home after school (which in my memory now seems to have always been a joyfully unburdened stroll) and decided instead to run. I may have been training for an upcoming sporting event, or I may simply have had one of those overly energised fits growing boys are prone to. Either way, I ran. I ran hard and I ran fast, sprinting the last 150 metres or so once I turned into my own street. When I changed out of my school uniform I noticed not only that the tips of my nipples were raw and slightly bleeding, but also they were abnormally swollen and tender. At the time I chalked it up to chafing or possibly some symptom of puberty that I had not yet encountered on or in my changeling body. In order to rule out chafing I took to wearing band aids over my nipples and avoided rough materials such as calico or denim. Within days it became clear that my condition was chronic, something more than chafing. Throughout the following months my nipples refused to contract to their former state. In fact, they swelled to the size of golf balls within a year, jutting out from my boyish chest like condensed breasts.

As with any physiological change that a pubescent child encounters but has not yet heard of from second or third parties, I hid my absurd nipples in shame, although I still assumed my nipples would subside. A pubescent body is always a secret but even in the midst of

the multitude of changes you are aware that it is a shared secret, confident that all of your forebears underwent approximately the same metamorphoses. I still remember the pride but also horror that I felt watching my pubic hair come forth. At first there were the mere rumours of hair just beneath my skin, gradually poking through one by one, coarse and fur-like, growing infinitesimally longer all the time until finally they began to take the shape of proud shrubbery, such as that which adorned my mother and father. Disgusting yet exciting is how I would describe puberty. I watched my penis grow as if it were a fantastic drama that I never wanted to end, a gripping one-man show. And the anticipation and embarrassment I felt when my voice began to creak and strain as it sunk lower and lower... My most ecstatic moments of pubescence were borne from developments that assured me that I was as normal as the sun rising.

But then, always hidden, pushed down by strips of duct tape, there were my nipples. My bulging, effeminate nipples. How they disgusted me when I looked in the mirror. By the age of 14 I had stopped engaging in any activity that required the removal of clothing. I ensured that all of my clothes were absurdly baggy and took care to hunch my shoulders. I had a recurring dream wherein both my nipples fell off or that I easily plucked them off, as if it had never before occurred to me to simply remove them, and underneath there were my old, beautifully normal nipples. I massaged them at night, as painful as that was, in an effort to break down the firm yet malleable substance that had pervaded my chest. But it was to no avail.

Eventually I began to feel furious towards my own body. I began to have new recurring dreams, violent and red, wherein I sliced my nipples clean off with a razor, blood spraying out thickly like perverse breast milk. I would hit my chest when I was alone, tentatively at first but soon viciously and earnestly; a cartoonish logic hoped that perhaps I would knock the lumps inside my body and they might travel to some other area that was more acceptable. By the age of 15 I had given up all hope of being rid of my abject nipples.

The horror then, when one day I stepped out of a hot shower and noticed that my left nipple had slightly dilated and protruding from its centre was a hard, white, waxy substance, stuck in it like a cork.

I vomited immediately. I was so revolted, so terrified that my body seemed to completely shut down; my gag reflex failed entirely and a stream of bangers and mash came silently flooding up my esophagus, down my chin and onto the floor in a heavy splash. I was paralysed momentarily before I sat down on the toilet behind me, unable to look at my body in fear of what I might see. I decided to focus on the continuation of my respiratory system. The worst possible scenario was for me to faint and be found lying in a puddle of vomit, naked and breasted, one of which seemed to be corked with wax. I breathed in and I breathed out. I closed my eyes but was forced to immediately open them again; there was a sharply defined and magnified afterimage of my nipple imprinted onto my eyelids. I felt another urge to vomit but managed to keep it down. I knew I needed to act there and then or I would lose my resolve. I inched my right hand towards my left nipple, forefinger and thumb slightly apart and poised in a pincer position. I felt the area immediately under my nipple, it was surprisingly pain free as I gently prodded it, but it was still swollen. My fingers searched the area delicately until I felt the edge of my nipple and prodded that too, it also did not hurt. I braced my self before I touched the white cork: it was greasy and reminded me of sebum or lard, but was also painless. With a surgeon's poise I took the horror between my fingers and with a gentle twisting motion, pulled it from my nipple. I threw the thing into the toilet and it floated there lightly until I flushed it down. I looked down at my nipple, which was now weeping a watery milk-like fluid. A small urge to vomit rose and fell away quickly. I knew the worst was behind me.

In the weeks following that incident, my other nipple uncorked itself with a small amount of manual encouragement, and it too expressed a milky substance; neither nipple lost this ability no matter how much I drained from them. However, I was generally ecstatic when my nipples gradually returned to an acceptable size, and decided to wait a few months to see if this ability to express milk was temporary, which would avoid the need for another soul to know how revolting my body was.

While my milk production did not cease, my life improved dramatically in the following year. I was able to wear normal clothes, I rekindled friendships that had fallen away, and most

excitingly I could now begin to navigate the murky waters of the opposite sex. Until that point those waters were not only uncharted, they were dangerous; 'here be monsters', the old maps read, and I was that monster. But now, the waters were filled with desires, mermaids and sirens and nymphs; a boy's imaginings of girls, clueless and simple, borne from both Disney princesses and the odd flash of soft-core pornography that I had been exposed to.

I soon learned that young women are nothing like Cinderella, nor are they like the beckoning and topless maids trapped in television screens late at night, desperately begging to be called and crawled upon. I did, however, eventually become infatuated with a girl my age that attended a nearby school. I couldn't say we loved each other, we hardly knew each other really, but I can say those few months that we spent together were the happiest days of my life. Our first kiss was, judging by others' examples, perhaps too heavy on the use of tongue and saliva, but it was heartfelt and genuine. We eventually advanced to groping each other blindly but thankfully male nipples are, as far as I'm aware, not remotely sexual or aesthetically pleasing, so I was spared having to explain my milk.

There is a habit that I presume to be universal wherein we remember past events but we edit and rework them to be more empowering, more in line with how we secretly see ourselves. You remember an argument you had at a party and instead of fumbling over your words you spout out witticisms worthy of Oscar Wilde. You remember an embarrassing faux pas and instead of blushing and stammering you nonchalantly laugh it off with impressive self-assuredness. You remember a sexual encounter and instead of being underwhelming you perform like an Adonis. On this last point, when I remember my sexual experience I have no desire to rework it or even improve it, I simply wish it had never occurred.

My aforementioned girlfriend and I were at a house party in an unfamiliar part of town, thrown by someone I did not know, in a bedroom that seemed to belong to someone's younger sister judging by the abundance of dolls and their respective houses and cars. We were drunk, too drunk for the experience to be enjoyable but drunk enough to push through our anxieties. We were kissing, a chaotic and sloppy kiss punctuated by our teeth clicking together. Eventually she grabbed my hand and pushed it down, guiding it up her skirt. I had no idea what I was supposed to do. What would be pleasurable to a vagina? I decided that pushing (mashing is probably more accurate) her underwear up into labia might be good. This maneuver was evidently unsuccessful, but that dry, static pushing continued for a few minutes until the lack of enjoyment became awkward, at which point she asked, 'do you want one?'

I replied that I did, assuming she meant a handjob, hopeful that she meant a blowjob, and trusting that she didn't mean pushing my underwear into my penis. At that point in my life puberty was a persistent memory but a memory nonetheless; the fantastic drama was over. I was ready for more, more of anything and everything. When she took hold of my erection I was surprised to find that life as I had known it continued in much the same manner. I had expected that sex, in any of its forms, would alter one's mental processes so that an entirely new aspect of life opened itself up. Perhaps that was because when my friends and peers had successfully completed a sexual act, especially sex itself, they seemed to have gained an aura of maturity and accomplishment. But no, she had my penis in her hand, she was moving her hand up and down and it felt okay, but there was no new psychological dimension opening up in my mind with each jerk of her hand. Even the realisation that I still had cogent thoughts was a surprise, I had thought, or hoped, thinking ceased and feeling was everything during sex. No. It was just life. I was quite disappointed. It took me a few minutes to put my disappointment aside and concentrate on the experience itself. It was nice in that it was novel to have a different hand doing the work, but it was generally much the same as when I masturbated. In fact, given that I was something of an expert on the matter, it was actually not all that enjoyable. And yet, being 17, I did begin to feel that rising pulse from somewhere behind my penis that indicated that I would indeed ejaculate. It was then that I looked down at my penis in her hand for the first time and I almost immediately came. When I say 'almost immediately', I can clarify that further by saying that a) I came about five seconds later, and that b) although I had that sensation of ejaculating, nothing came out, something that had not happened since my salad days of masturbating.

It was slightly embarrassing when a quiet moan escaped my mouth, I shuddered a bit, and

then nothing. She took her hand away and looked at me questioningly, but I had no answers for her. I felt myself blush, which always makes the embarrassed more embarrassed, and tried to explain, 'I came. At least I felt myself come but it didn't actually come. Maybe I'm nervous…' but she was not convinced and, as is all too often the lot of teenaged girls, she blamed herself. I assured her that it was not her, that it was absolutely me, but she remained unconvinced. The room was now utterly bereft of romance and she looked as though she might cry. I decided to pull up my pants, as I think most people agree that a flaccid penis is often an affront when in the company of others, but as I stood up I felt a foreign and unpleasantly thick sensation slide from somewhere near my bladder, down along the line of my perineum and down the length of my penis.

A large, slightly transparent, whitish tadpole fell from my urethra onto the carpet and proceeded to flop about like a fish on land. Obviously she screamed. She screamed incredibly loudly. I had never and have never since been present when someone is so traumatised by an event that a single, short, sharp yelp is not cathartic enough to deal with the situation. But for this event even an interminable and gargling scream from deep in her guts could not allay her understandable horror. And I'm not going to suggest she should have or could have responded differently, I just wish she had of. You hear of people being struck dumb in fairytales, and I so desperately wish that could have been her response.

Her screams alerted others from the party, probably assuming some kind of sexual assault or perhaps a drug overdose had occurred, and presently two young men barged into the room, bouncing on the balls of their feet like boxers. Thankfully I had managed to pull up my pants by then, but I had not managed to collect whatever it was that had slithered from my penis. The young men, much bigger than me I soon realised, demanded to know 'What the fuck's going on here? You all right, Love? What's this prick done?' etc. My girlfriend (I suppose ex-girlfriend at that point) was unable to commune to them the cause of her trauma beyond pointing to the floor at my produce. I, in turn, could see that it was impossible to explain the situation in a satisfactory manner, and decided that fleeing was the best course of action. I bent down and after a couple of attempts succeeded in grasping the extremely slimy, still slowly quivering entity. I will clarify here that my motive was simply the removal of evidence, not any empathetic or nurturing sentiment towards what I was picking up. Innumerable is the number of times I have wished I had kept my head and simply squashed whatever it was and then sworn from hell to high heaven that it was simply run of the mill sperm.

With the offending object in hand, I ran. I dodged the angry young men, ran down the hallway of the house, out the front door, and I continued running until I saw a familiar landmark. I found my bearings and began to walk home. Eventually I became aware that my right hand was clenched in a fist, and when I opened my hand I saw it clearly for the first time. It was, for all intents and purposes, an abnormally large tadpole seemingly formed out of semen; milky white and slightly transparent with a bulbous head tapering off in pointed tail. I couldn't call it a heartbeat, but I could feel a rhythmic wobbling coming out of it. It had started to dry out and stick to my hand, so I curled my palm slightly and spat in it, forming a pool. It gave what seemed to be an appreciative wriggle, and its apparent awareness, perhaps even sentience, rendered me unable to shed myself of its disgusting presence.

As you may have guessed, I have just recounted the birth of my son.

My ex-girlfriend for her part never divulged what transpired that night, but her silence was still damning. It was assumed that I had assaulted her; usually people said that I had tried to rape her. Eventually I lost all of my friends, as I couldn't explain honestly what happened without admitting that an intelligent tadpole of sperm was birthed from my penis that night. So, friendless but now a father I withdrew from the world, including from my family who, while they assured me they believed that I had done nothing wrong that night nonetheless began a slow process of renunciation. I left both home and my hometown at the very first opportunity when I finished secondary school. I received high enough grades to gain entry to an interstate university where I studied biology. As much as I tried to bring tutorials and lectures around to the topics of either amphibian reproduction or human sperm I was never able to even remotely understand my son.

I did, however, quickly learn how to be a father. Spit was not a good enough lubricant for

him; a mixture of water, sugar, a tiny bit of gelatin and a drop of fruit juice is required to keep him hydrated. It took me a couple of days to realise that my body had been preparing for his birth since I myself was a boy. My nipples, the milk… the moment it dawned on me was the closest I've ever come to squashing him or flushing him down the toilet. I read Medea recently and part of me can understand where she is coming from.

Compared to a human child he is very low maintenance. He does not produce any excrement (although he smells strongly of sperm), needs a few drops of my milk once in the morning and once at night, and only requires my hydrating solution about once a week. He is five years old at present, and has grown to be the size of a floppy grapefruit. He still has a tail but has also grown legs and arms that seem to be much too slender for his bulk. His limbs are completely useless for walking or grasping unless he begins to dry out. He has a very small stump jutting out from the base of his tail, which I presume is some kind of penis. I think I will either kill him or myself if is transpires that he is capable of producing more of his kind autonomously. For now he simply glides around in the sink, sometimes in a circular motion, sometimes up and down in a line. I'm also concerned he is going to continue his transformation and turn into a toad capable of jumping. I cannot imagine how disgusting the sound would be if he were to start vaulting himself about the place…

He can talk, which is when I find him most revolting. He has a mouth but it is not used for eating, and I believe he forced a mouth into his design just to spite me. He almost universally asks for food. Although it is never really a question, he simply gargles out the word: food, at which point I have to squeeze a bit of my milk into the sink for him to loll around in. He absorbs the milk through his skin I presume.

He disgusts me, completely and utterly, but I don't hate him, not completely. I know that I will never love him either, but sometimes I genuinely want to love him, which is something. Recently I told him that I try to love him but I can't and he responded with a toneless 'yes' that I was unable to interpret in any emotional sense. I am not sure if he has emotions… If only his skin would begin to gain some colour or at least become opaque, that would help enormously I'm sure. I fear that one day I will suffer some kind of mental break and squash him during one of my moods, such as the one I'm in now. But I have a more nauseating fear that tomorrow, every tomorrow, when I wake up he will still be there, swilling around in my sink.

The End.

James Tagliabue

Details Not Released At This Time

Only Skin Deep

Karen Holt

Physician: Dr. Edgar
9828-SJE41

CASE #16906

Only Skin Deep

By Karen Holt

A CHILLED BREEZE PICKED UP and a bank of dry autumn leaves pirouetted across the street. Goosebumps tightened over my bare flesh. It felt exhilarating. Denim shorts hugging my body barely covered the cheeks of my backside. The cropped top revealed acres of toned stomach which flexed with the smooth hip-rolling action of my stride.

Beth laughed. "You must be frozen." She pulled her sweater sleeves down over hands which she tucked under her arms.

"Man-up, Beth," I said lightly, adjusting the grip on the document folder brushing my thigh. We were only a ten minute walk from the car.

My body declared to the world that I was a survivor. Tattoo ink stained the skin of my arms, my midriff, and my thighs. One arm was almost entirely covered and the other was catching up fast. Each tattoo depicted a gift given to me by my father, usually just before he climbed into my bed and said 'all daddies touch their little girls there'.

The first tattoo which I inked for myself remained my favorite. An ash-gray, fluffy bear entangled in barbed wire. I was proud of that one. Daddy hadn't touched me in five years. Not since I buried the steel needle of the compass from my geometry set in the hand he rested on my desk when he loomed over me. Now, with my rebellion emblazoned across my skin, he couldn't even look at me without seeing what he did. ***Yeah, I'm a survivor.***

The early evening shoppers flowing along High Street looked jaded. Most of them, laden with carrier bags bearing store names that declared them as penny pinchers or frivolous, were heading home.

"If I'm going to land this job, I have to let the guy see the merchandise."

Beth snorted. "You're applying to be a tattooist, not a stripper. And anyway, that's what the portfolio is for."

I wiggled my eyebrows. "This 'Aiden Hawkes' guy is a looker, you never know."

"Oh, shut up," Beth muttered. "Like you can tell that from a cheesy grin on a flyer." She, more than anyone, knew I operated a strictly hands off policy. ***Well, my skin did***. It crawled whenever a guy touched it. ***Talk about 'eighteen and never been kissed'.***

Sucking in my stomach and hitching a hip, I pulled the black and white flyer out from where I'd wedged it in my pocket. Scanning the street, I met the eyes of a middle-aged guy. The tight leer smeared on his face made my stomach roll over. "Piss off, grandad."

I grinned as he scuttled away, a ruddy flush creeping up his neck

Beth snatched the paper from my fingers. "Eve, stop arsing around. I want to go out tonight. Now where's this tattoo parlor?"

Following the faux hand-drawn map, we located the back street and made our way along the sidewalk, looking out for number forty eight. Autumn nights came in fast, and the street lights emitted a neon reddish glow as they warmed up.

"C'mon, it's late. The place will still be there tomorrow." Beth tugged on my arm.

"He said tonight. You go home if you want."

"As if. I'm your wingman, remember." Her grimace made me laugh.

"There," I said, relieved to end her suffering and my own guilt.

"Thank The Lord."

The shop window had faded streaks of whitewash arcing over it. Cupping my hands and peering into the dimly lit interior, I made out posters dotted around mostly bare walls and a desk with a telephone. "It looks a bit crappy."

"Let's leave it then." Beth swung around. She certainly seemed in a hurry to leave.

"Hold on. I've come this far. I've bumped into this guy three times. It's got to be fate."

"Some fate, Eve. He flyer-bombed the shopping mall, then he hit you again a week later on High Street."

I waved the flyer under her nose. "But this one came through my door."

Beth glared. "Well, get in there so we can go home."

I gave her a sloppy salute. "Aye aye, skipper."

Shouldering my way through the door, I pinned a confident half-smile on my face. The smell of fresh paint was overpowering. The fluorescent strip above the counter picked out navy strands in the sleek, black bob of the girl who turned to greet me.

"Evelyne Blake? Right?" Her smile didn't reach her eyes.

I suddenly wanted to back out of the door, but Beth, her cheeks red with the chill of the whistling breeze, had followed me inside, blocking my retreat.

"I'm Siobhan."

Of course you are. The pierced lips, nose, and too many earrings to count at a glance were not a surprise either.

The door in the back wall opened, and the definitely non-stereotypical figure I found strangely familiar entered the room. The tailored black pants and white shirt he wore hugged a muscular frame. His ice grey eyes were eerily blank for a second, but then he smiled, his perfect teeth and dramatic bone structure having a devastating effect on my breathing.

A slim-fingered, well-manicured hand waved, taking in the shop interior. "Just moved in. It looks uninspiring, I know. I'm Aiden Hawkes." He shook my hand. "Come through to the business end and show me what you've got."

My cheeks burned as his eyes took a tour over the tattoos on my body. His eyebrow arched as he added softly, "In your portfolio."

My dry throat croaked as I breathed in. Feeling foolish, I darted a 'help me' look at Beth and then strode forward. ***Confidence. That's what I need right now.*** I lifted my chin, brushing aside the chestnut bangs which hung artfully into my eyes, and smiled.

Walking past Aiden resembled an Alice Through the Looking Glass experience. The bland, featureless room I left behind made the cluttered kaleidoscope of color in this room a shock to the system.

The muted gold-tones on the walls created a back drop to an array of framed tattoo designs etched onto sheets of canvas and stretched over wooden frames. Before I could take a closer look, Aiden said, "Evelyne, take a seat."

I stared at the intricate design of a serpent coiled around a newborn baby before dragging my attention away.

Aiden plucked my portfolio from my slack grasp and sat down.

Surprised, I turned to inspect the bronze, leather treatment couch, noticing a matching kneeling-chair with a chin rest, and two regular chairs. The trolleys, laid out with the

organized chaos of tattoo guns and adapters, wrapped disposable needles, ink cartridges, antiseptics, and the rest, were not dissimilar to the kit I had gathered in my bedroom.

I remained standing as Aiden leafed through my portfolio with discouraging speed. His attention shifted to my face. He nodded towards my decorated body and said, "Are any of those your own handiwork?"

I blushed, the flesh in my nape tightening at the intent look in his cold eyes.

"You know, I'll need to think this over. I'm not sure this…" I flapped a hand, indicating the well used inking tools. "is for me, after all."

"That's a shame, you're very talented. The destroyed childhood toys are powerful pieces." He flipped the page to a hobby horse, it's painted features melting. "Have you got this one?"

I swallowed and nodded.

"Look Evelyne, you're just what I'm looking for. Take a few minutes to think things over, okay?"

"Okay. Thank you." I didn't know what else to say.

Pulling aside a thin leather curtain, Aiden disappeared through a door I had not noticed before.

I swayed on trembling legs. Cold seeped into my bones. ***Perhaps the chill outside got to me, after all.*** The cork floor-tiles moved like quicksand beneath my heels and, suddenly, standing still felt impossible. I circled the room.

The hum of an air conditioner registered as an annoyance. The beige walls of the windowless space began to close in. I wasn't going to change my mind, but just walking out went against the grain. I searched the couch and chair for my folder. ***Shit, he must have it. Okay. He won't be long.***

Studying the tattoo display on the wall, I ran my finger over an intricately colored humming bird design. The parchment felt stiff and the network of crinkles had a familiar quality. Leaning in closer, I inhaled sharply as I noticed pinprick holes. Fine hairs caught the light.

Jerking back, I shot a glance down at the porcelain doll drawn on my upper arm, the crack carved into her face resembling a red blade of lightning. As sweat broke out over my body, I heard the scuff of shoes, and pain scythed through my head. My neck muscles screamed as my skull jolted with the blow. I fell, but I never felt my body hit the floor.

Consciousness returned as nausea swilling in my stomach. A tight band across my chest restricted my breathing. I heard a low humming noise. ***Someone singing.*** Opening my eyes shot colors and pain through my head as a halogen lamp glared down from above. ***Dentist? Was the tattoo parlor a dream?*** The bile churning in my gut reflected a feeling of dread.

"You're awake," a conversational voice said.

My neck muscles cramped as I rolled my head on a padded cushion. ***Aiden.*** His smile was genuine, gleeful.

"I ***am*** glad. I always like the artist to know which pieces are my favorites."

My heart jolted as his hand ran down my bare stomach, drifted over my hip and framed my thigh. I was naked.

His finger tapped on the outer side of my thigh. "This one is genius. A Jack-in-the-box which holds a skeleton. I like your darkness. The first time I saw this, I knew I had to have it."

The first time? My throat croaked. "First time?"

Warm breath fanned my hair as he leaned in and whispered, "In the mall. A walking canvas of such beauty."

My naive comments to Beth rose to choke me. ***Not fate then.***

Aiden watched my face. "Ah… you get it now. I followed you home. The flyer through your door was not fate." His hand stroked up my thigh and over my belly.

"I'll take the job. Please." Tears ran down my cheeks, wetting the hair at my temples. My instinct to swipe them away was foiled by leather bonds secured around my wrists, the strap tying them together passing underneath my backside.

Aiden clucked his tongue and disappeared from my vision. Straining my neck, my eyes aching in their sockets, I could see the muscles in his back rippling beneath his spotless white shirt. A rhythmic scraping of steel being sharpened on leather filled the room. I heard a keening whimper and realized it was inside my head.

"Please. God, no, no, no…" ***No, no, no.***

I didn't need to see the flash of light on the blade to know what was happening. Blinking to clear my vision, I scoured the room. Leather bit into my wrists and ankles as my muscles jerked, running, even though I couldn't move.

The tattoos on the walls, the hairs… I knew what they were. My skin, stretched over wooden frames, would soon join the display.

He clamped his hand over my face, smothering my scream. The grip bruised my flesh. I heard my cheekbones creaking. The recently stropped blade felt warm as it sliced through my skin.

Beth. She'll tell someone. Blood filled my mouth as I bit my tongue, my body shuddering.

"Keep still or you'll ruin your work." The knife in front of my face dripped blood onto my chest. The inkblots in my head grew larger. His words echoed down a dark tunnel. "I hoped your friend had some examples of your work. But no. Her skin was bare."

The End.

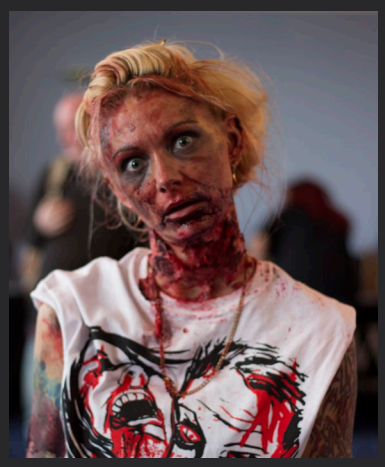
Karen Holt

I came late to writing. I was bitten by the bug, and now, I cannot stop! I am writing vampire novels under the series title of 'Fire and Ice', which are best described as dark fantasy/horror. There will be 5 novels in all. I have the 1st and 2nd books, 'Awakening' and 'Survival', delivered to my literary agent, and the 3rd, 'Earth Walker' is in the final edit stage. I am a dabbler, so I have written 27,000 words of the 4th in the series 'Heart of Stone', and the final episode, 'Invasion' has a chapter plan. Death of Connor is the prequel to the series, and the version posted on here requires some brutal self editing, which is another project to undertake... if there were an extra 12 hours in each day, then I'd be all set!

GROUP THERAPY

TOP 10 UK & US

We take a look at the best selling Kindle titles from the UK and US markets.

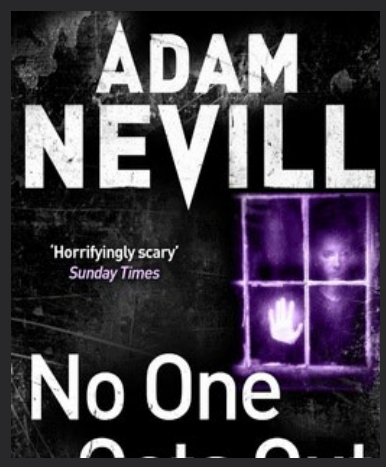


SCARDIFF 2014

Sanitarium showcased itself umongs the horror loving people of Cardiff in October. We catch up with organisers Wayne and TK.

THE HOPE SPOT

This edition of the Hope Spot see R. Donald James Gauvreau delving into the topic of the Masks of Cuthulu



REVIEWS

The team at gingernutsfhorror.com open their library to us.

Bestselling Horror US

1 *Pines - Blake Crouch*

2 A Good Marriage - *Stephen King*

3 The Last Town - *Blake Crouch*

4 Wayward - *Blake Crouch*

5 Snowbound - *Blake Crouch*

6 Forced Ascent (The Demon Accords Book 7) -*John Conroe*

7 The Line (Witching Savannah Book 1) -*J. D. Horn*

8 Big Driver - *Stephen King*

9 The Source (Witching Savannah Book 2) - *J.D. Horn*

10 The Wolf and the Bobcat - *E A Price*

Compiled September 1st -Septermber 31st 2014
Amazon.co.uk Kindle Chart

Bestselling Horror UK

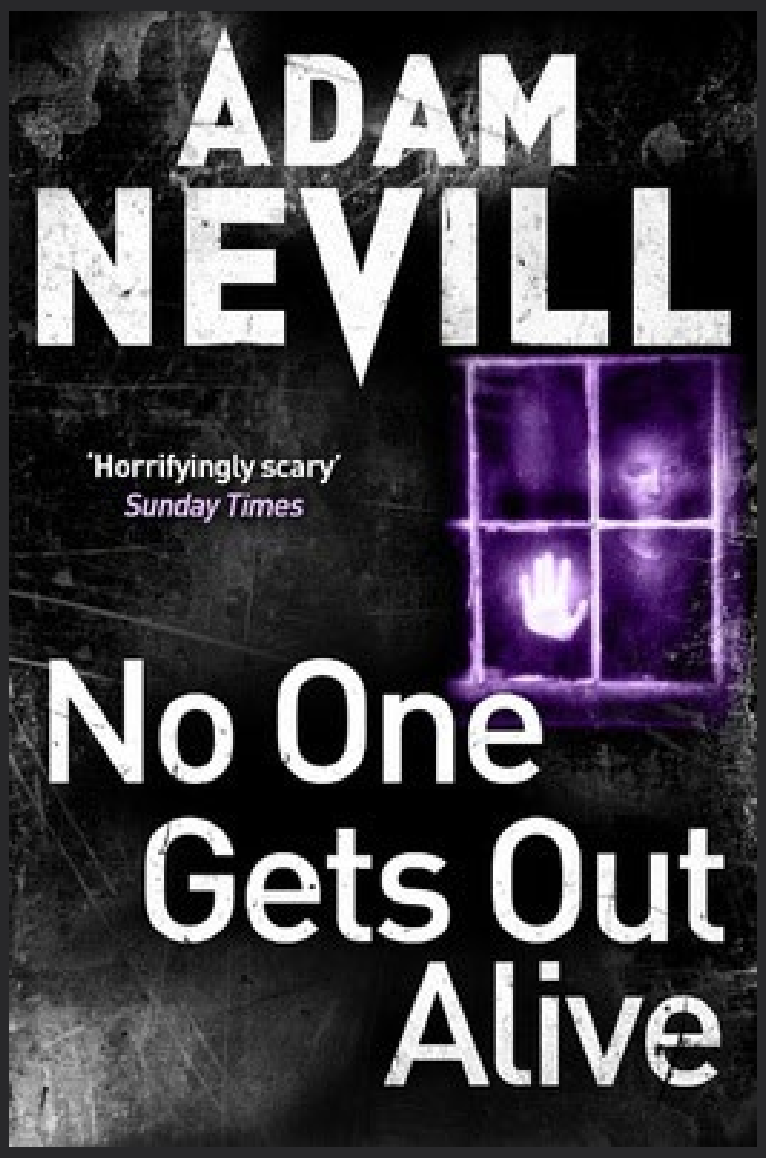
1. Snowbound - *Blake Crouch*
2. World War Z - *Max Brooks*
3. The Wolf and the Bobcat - *E A Price*
4. The Powers That Be (Lycan Romance) - *A B Lee*
5. Horns - *Joe Hill*
6. Forced Ascent (The Demon Accords Book 7) - *John Conroe*
7. The Last Plague - *Rich Hawkins*
8. His Mate - Brothers - *M L Briers*
9. Dawn of Swords - *David Dalglish*
10. Doctor Sleep - *Stephen King*

Compiled September 1st -Septermber 31st 2014
Amazon.com Kindle Chart

NO ONE GETS OUT ALIVE
ADAM NEVILL - A REVIEW

There comes a time in a writer's career, where everything they have written before gels and coalesces into the novel that they were meant to write. It can be a frightening time for a writer when this happens, what if this is the pinnacle of their career? What if everything else they write after this book doesn't match up? It must be a troubling time for a writer.

Adam Nevill's No One Gets Out Alive is one such book, but if I was him I wouldn't be too concerned about reaching a pinnacle, as I have been saying this about his writing ever since Apartment 16. His novels just get better and better. He is a master craftsman of the horror genre. Fully aware of what has come before him, he plucks tropes and themes form the genre with perfect precision then proceeds to spin a captivating tale that really does stay with you long after you have finished it.



By all accounts this was a difficult book to write, Nevill was concerned with some of themes and situations that he puts Stephanie through during the course of the narrative, and I can see why. This is a brutal book, no brutal isn't the correct word. Brutal implies that this is a derivative slasher / torture porn novel. Which it most certainly not the case This is an intelligently crafted novel of sheer terror and suspense. One that is not afraid to play around with the well-worn and often silly topes of female victims in horror.

The character of Stephanie in many ways shares a similar heritage to that of Catherine from Adam's previous novel The House of Small Shadows, she comes from a tortured past, of broken relationships and broken families. Almost meek and timid she is buffeted along in the narrative like a lost soul at sea. Passive and scared, she makes mistakes, does things that will have you thinking why did you do that. Incapable of finding a way out, she is forced to play along with and is at the mercy of her landlord Knacker. To some readers who are so used to having protagonists take charge and save the day, this might be frustrating at first, but stay with it, Nevill has full control of Stephanie's story and her character's development. He takes her on a journey of discovery and change. Her journey from victim to hero is a considered and steady one that is a revelation to read. So when she finally does take charge of her destiny it feels completely natural, rather than like the fighter who suddenly finds his strength in the final round.

During this journey Nevill puts her through hell, and I mean Hell. No One Gets Out Alive is a novel of terror, and for this jaded reviewer it has been a long time

since a novel had such an effect on me. I'm not a man prone to nightmares, but halfway through reading this novel I had a nightmare that had me reliving the story as Stephanie. It was one of those nightmares that severely changed my mood for a couple of days. So much so I had to put the book aside for a while. However I had to finish it, such was the power of this book, you become so invested in Stephanie's story you have to finish the novel.

Probably the strongest part of this book is the way in which Nevill has managed to craft a story that when taken as a whole is one of the most terrifying novels you will read. Yet when you look at the isolated incidents in the book, with the exception of one or two scenes, there is nothing that is any more graphic or brutal than you would see in an episode of EastEnders. This is an insidious novel, it slowly creeps under your skin and starts to twist away at your psyche. A gradual and ever building sense of dread starts on page one and doesn't let up. Nevill hooks you into the narrative and takes you on a trip of sheer unfaltering terror so much so that the once innocent and playful Pop Goes The Weasel will never be the same again.

Nevill use of a small cast of characters, essentially four, Stephanie, Knacker, Fergal, and the mysterious occupant of the locked room, adds to the dusty, dark and claustrophobic feel of the novel. The interplay between Stephanie and Knacker is pitch perfect, the dialogue between the two of them will have you on edge, waiting for an explosion of hate and violence from the nasty landlord.

On that note Knacker is wonderful creation In the hands of a lesser writer Knacker would have come across as a pure cliché, there is a fine line between scary and sleazy landlord from The League of Gentlemen one that Nevill never crosses. A dirty sleazebag in a pair of jogging pants, he is a distillation of every slumlord committed to page or film. He is well written and well developed, to the point where there are a few occasions where you almost feel a tiny bit sorry for him.

Fergal is a different character altogether. There is not much to him, both physically and character wise. It's as though Nevill has kept his character as lean as his description. He is more of an avatar of violence and hate, than a fully developed character. Which is a clever move, we know right from the start that Fergal is a feral creature, barely housetrained, and barely kept in check by Knacker, always straining at the bit waiting to strike. And when he does boy does he strike.

As for the mysterious occupant, let's just say keep an eye out from a good harvest.

The clever use of a time dilation at the two thirds mark changes the tone of the novel, from a dark, dusty and claustrophobic feel, to one that almost feels light and airy, it's a little disorientating at first, but it soon finds it's feet and gives you all the answers you need and the ending that the book deserved.

No one Gets Out Alive is one of the most accomplished and terrifying novels I have ever read. Intense, unnerving and gripping this is a novel where No One Gets Out of it Unchanged.

- See more at: http://gingernutsofhorror.com/4/post/2014/10/no-one-gets-out-alive-by-adam-nevill.html#sthash.Vny12tR6.dpuf

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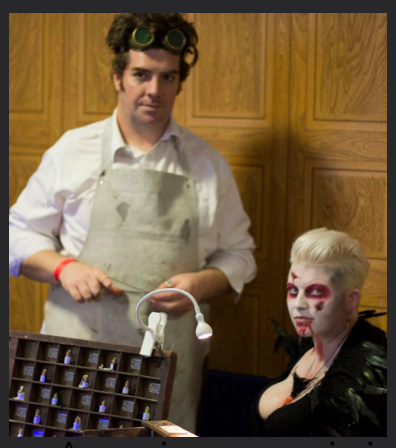


Am si occum ipiet

SCARdiff is an annual expo celebrating all things horror: books, comics, movies, cosplay, the works. 2014′ s event is an ALL AGES show, scheduled for Sunday 19th October at our new venue, Cardiff Masonic Hall.

www.scardiff.co.uk

SCARDIFF 2014.

This year's SCARdiff was held at a new venue, the Cardiff Masonic Hall. How do you feel it went in the new location?

We feel the new venue was a huge success and the feedback to date from attendees supports this. We had visited a few prospective venues prior to booking but when we walked into Cardiff Masonic Hall we just knew it 'fit'. It's a stunning building steeped in history and intrigue and we felt it gave the perfect 'vibe' for our event. The staff could not have been friendlier or more helpful. We really like the different levels and rooms and also that you didn't have to travel far to get to anywhere. It's a deceptively spacious building. The temple really was the piece de resistance offering a fitting location for the panels and movie. Our plan is to book again for SCARdiff 2015.

As you may know, Sanitarium loves to feature horror authors both old

and new. This year's live pitching sessions for budding novelists sound like a great arena for some new authors to get some feedback on their ideas. How well do you think it was received and what was the feedback?

The feedback was good. The fact that the pitchers were nervous showed the importance of the panel to them. They were getting the opportunity to receive feedback from industry experts. Our hope is that having narrated their work within a public arena, the budding authors will now feel more confident with pushing forward and finishing their novels, seeking publishers or writing their next pieces.

As the organizers of the expo, what event were you most looking forward to and looking back did it live up to your expectations?

We should answer that one separately! Ha ok so I (Rebecca) was most looking forward to seeing the traders set up, bringing the venue alive. As producers, we had planned meticulously but were aware that all we could so was offer a back bone for the event. The traders and public were going to be the meat on the bones and we wouldn't know what that would look like until the day. I was not disappointed. The traders all made such an effort on their stalls and deservedly did well because if this. Oh and Honey the Albino was a highlight of mine: as animal lovers and supporters of animal rights we were thrilled to be able to invite David Board of Animal Zone UK in to come down for the day with his rescued exotics and educate people about their care and welfare.

Wayne: For me, it was the SFX duel. It was a feature I really enjoyed from 2013's event but moving it onto the stage this year really gave it a new lease of life. Both duelers, Jodie Gibson and Jenny Jackson, really went for it, bringing a real sense of theatre and macabre to the event. Huge props to their models, too: Jo Barry and Neen UK, who were absolutely great sports on the day.

Were there any WTF moments?

Great question! To be honest, not

① **- Morbitorium**
Horrifc items for Christmas - this is a muct viist

② **- Stiffs**
A series that is well worth a read

"Honey" keeping everyone entertained

really. We had anticipated all sorts of WTF scenarios but fortunately none transpired! The event had a really good atmosphere, people were there to enjoy themselves, and we feel it was a success. There are definitely things we will seek to change and improve for next year, but I'd describe those as teething problems rather than WTF moments.

There has been a huge increase of popularity in zombie-themed movies, television, comics and gaming in the past several years. Do you think the mainstream media has influenced more people to become horror and sci-fi enthusiasts and check out expos such as SCARdiff?

I think it's certainly helped. But, for me, SCARdiff is thriving off an established community of horror fans within the South Wales area – be that gamers, comicbook readers, cosplayers, movie buffs, whatever. My hope is that SCARdiff simply provides a platform for that community, a place to come together and share/ celebrate their passion. That's certainly our vision, moving forward.

How do you get feedback from the patrons of the expo? What challenges did you overcome from last year's expo that you've improved upon for this year?

We received a lot of verbal feedback from patrons on the day, all of which was positive. Since the event, we've read blog reviews and facebook comments which again have made us very proud. No doubt over coming months we'll have received more feedback – some positive, some negative – all of which is welcome! With 2013's expo being the first time running an exclusively horror event, we were feeling around in the dark, so to speak, but we learned a lot about what people want and what they are not so crazy about - we must thank Mike Allwood who helped shape the vision for SCARdiff, originally a spin-off from his comic expos, now taking on a whole identity of its own. We also faced weather issues last year which couldn't have been helped. In short, we've seen this year as an opportunity to grow the event and add things that we felt would be welcomed by the patrons.

Are there still opportunities for volunteers to help out at this year's expo?

No, but certainly ample opportunities for next year. Watch our Facebook page for more info!

The SFX duel drew in a huge crowd. With Halloween fast approaching, do you think the makeup artists will be inspiring any costumes in particular?

Ha! They'll be inspiring people to use buckets of gore, I dare say. And all manner of crazy props.

Where do you see the horror industry (from movies to comics to books to television) headed in the future? Are there any underground themes that you see emerging that might go mainstream soon?

I think cosplay's a big thing right now and only set to grow. It both feeds and feeds upon the industry's output – be that within movies, books, comicbooks, TV, whatever – and it will be interesting to see how that impacts upon the industry, moving forward. In terms of themes, I think you'll always have the classic tropes: zombies, vampires, werewolves, ghosts, witches etc. Using those tropes to do something fresh and exciting is the challenge.

And finally, what is the main message of the expo that you hope patrons walk away with after their day at SCARdiff?

That horror, as a sub-culture, is something that is thriving within South Wales and SCARdiff is a place to celebrate and showcase that.

A big thanks to Wayne Simmons for taking the time to talk to us and put n such a great day (big thnaks to all those who helped behind the sences as well)

Until next year,,,,,

THE HOPE SPOT

Masks of Cthulhu

By R. Donald James Gauvreau

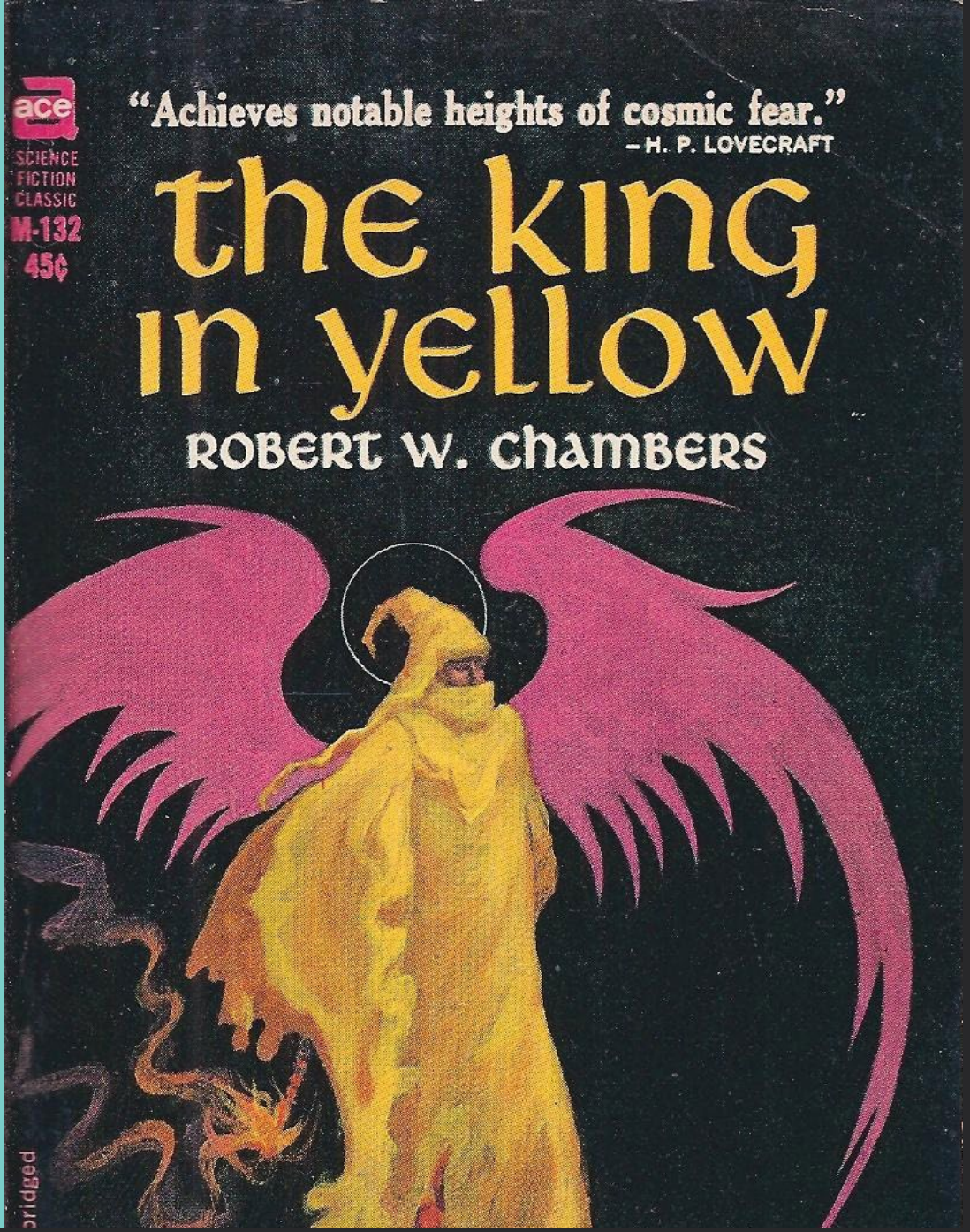
There are a lot of reasons that Lovecraft is such a beloved author (thankfully, none of them have to do with the racism). But the thing that has done the most for me is the mythology that he constructed. This was as ground-breaking as anything else that Lovecraft did, you have to understand. The mentoring and encouragement that he provided was certainly the biggest overall contribution that Lovecraft made, at least to horror: Pretty much every big name in the field today is, in a literary sense, his child or grandchild.

But for direct contributions? The Mythos stands head and shoulders above any other thing that he did. Lord Dunsany's The Gods of Pegana was the first outright constructed mythology in fiction, but Lovecraft's was the very first that was set in our world, intended to be taken as authentic.

Today, then, I want to talk about ways that we can work with this mythology of Lovecraft's and, by turning it over this way and that-a-ways, pulling on one thing and then another, we can create something new. Because yeah, Cthulhu's great and all, but Lovecraft didn't stop reinterpreting his beasties (for that matter, many began as reinterpretations) and neither should we. It's mistaking the veneer of Lovecraft's work for the substance, and if you ask me that's the chief reason that we have some Lovecraft fatigue going on.

These can be used for more than Mythos stories, too. Lovecraft's mythology is one that you can play off of for your own purposes as easily as werewolves or zombies. You can take Nyarlathotep or the Deep Ones as inspiration for something that totally divorced from their source material, both its content and its themes.

As always, feel free to use these as you wish.



- Hidden meanings at every turn
True Detective fans think so.

In Practice: Five Takes on Cthulhu

Thool: This one began mostly as a whim, working on a kind of Mythos that drew on birds more than sea creatures and deciding to envision Cthulhu as an eater of the dead. From there I went to the Christian sacrament ("this is my body, take and eat") and, looking at The Rats in the Walls, decided that Thool was worshiped as a "true image" of God by the inner circle at Exham Priory during its time as a monastery.
They're going to have some freaky rites, I tell you.
I added an albatross vibe (from Rime of the Ancient Mariner) pretty soon after that: Thool and its servants are not something that you mess with, because bad things happen to those that hurt its servants. Sure, you killed its inhuman messenger but now the town you thought to save is going to slide into a permanent economic depression.

Huitzilopochtli: In Lovecraft's The Mound we find Cthulhu (Tulu) and Yig closely associated with each other. As we know from The Curse of Yig that Yig was worshiped as Quetzalcoatl, it begs the question if Cthulhu was similarly represented. I chose to represent Cthulhu as Huitzilopochtli for two reasons: (1) he is mentioned in the story The Transition of Juan Romero; and (2) while there is no enmity between snakes and hummingbirds specifically, as a class birds and snakes don't generally get along.
From Juan Romero we see that Huitzilpochtli is presaged by storms and a throbbing in the ground.
If I made a collection of Bird-centric Mythos stories, I suppose this mask would go just fine following after a story about Thool.

Ku-Tu-Ru: AKA The Bear That Eats Men Alive. I came up with this one by focusing on the

“sleeping until present conditions change” bit. So Cthulhu’s a big freaking bear now. Just, game over man. We’re done.
The Ainu are the best-known bear worshipers, so we’ll set Ku-Tu as the original focus of this practice. Sacrifices are made to prolong his hibernation by giving him nourishment. Ku-Tu-Ru will actually wake up whenever, not just when the stars are right, so long as he gets hungry enough. It may not be optimal for him but it’ll be even more non-optimal for us.

The Red King: Cthulhu is asleep, right? Well why not take a cue from Through the Looking Glass: “Why, you’re only a sort of thing in his dream! If that there King was to wake, you’d go out— bang!— just like a candle!”
So Cthulhu is the Red King, either named so by a student of the classics or by Lewis Carrol himself (it is not very hard to suppose that Carrol used Alice’s adventures to encode Secrets Man Was Not Meant to Know). His dreams create the world, or at least the world as we know it, and should Cthulhu awaken he will do so to either an emptiness or a filled world, but one totally unlike the one which we now inhabit, as if we were but a dream-veil draped across the surface of the real world. Obviously, we don’t want him to awaken.
Because of the shared color and monarch motifs, he may be linked to and/or oppose the King in Yellow.

Kith Tar Lu: Cthulhu as worshiped by the cult at Irem, the first city. Kith Tar

Lu is probably my most radical reinterpretation of Cthulhu. In the faux scholarly paper that I wrote for Irem, clues were placed to suggest that Kith Tar Lu, as a locust countless mouths and wings, actually predated the image of Cthulhu as an octopus deity. From the unstoppable and numberless locust swarms we find justification for an eventual (and genuinely factual) association with the hydra with its multiplying heads, and later the hydra becomes associated by the Cthulhu cults with the octopus, another water creature whose many limbs supply another point of similarity with the hydra. Cthulhu as we know him today may have lost his locust origins entirely (unless the wings are some kind of relic) but strong traces of the hydra remain in his dragon-like body.
At Irem, Kith Tar Lu was described with the formulaic "azen, halapatu, niganu" (loosely, "destructive, to be destroyed, & that which is forbidden because of disease"). References to Kith Tar Lu survived into Babylonian times, and he may have provided been the origin for the god Marduk.

R. Donald James Gauvreau maintains a blog at www.whitemarbleblock.blogspot.com, where he regularly posts story ideas, free fiction, and other goodies, including a free guide to comparative mythology that was written specifically with worldbuilding in mind.

He is probably not a spider.

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Scrap Paper

Lee Foreman

Physician: Dr. Peterson
8268-WCT29

CASE #82743

Scrap Paper

By Lee Foreman

THE MONSTER'S REAL.

Every second it came closer and there was no stopping it. The awful scratching and scraping in the hall outside John's apartment neared and would soon be at his door. He didn't bother to barricade it or nail it shut; nothing could keep it out.

Any detail he could imagine of the horrible thing became wiped out by the cartoony drawings laid out on his desk. All in black crayon, scribbled on the paper like the artwork of a young child, were the only images of the thing he had seen with his own eyes. But he knew it did not come from imagination, nor was it drawn by a child.

The first time John saw the wrinkled scraps of paper taped to the wall in the bathroom he thought nothing of them. He assumed some fool at work had put them there and paid no attention. It was probably Akhil or Joe, they were always playing practical jokes. If he had known then what they were he would have quit his job that day and never gone back.

But it was too late. It was nearly at his door and there was no forgetting what he knew, no taking back what had already been done, no erasing the past.

He tried everything to save himself, even burning the stack of crumpled and stained loose leaf paper, but it always came back. The first few times they returned after he'd disposed of them he still told himself it was a very well executed prank. He went as far as thinking someone had made extra keys to his apartment so they could plant the papers there every time he got rid of them. But his fears were proven when he went fishing to get away from the bothersome prank and had caught the stack of paper with his rod and pulled it out of the water. He nearly fell out of the boat. He found them in his mailbox, in his dresser drawers, in his car, even in his pockets when he dressed in the morning. He couldn't escape them. And each day there were more.

Eventually he started putting them in boxes and stacking them in his bedroom. When he ran out of room he began stuffing them in the closet. When that was full he just left

them wherever they appeared. Now he was nearly buried. Countless sheets of paper covered the floor and furniture. He walked in it, sat in it, and slept in it. But you really couldn't call it sleeping. It was more like a nightmare that did not end when the sun came up.

The phone rang. It echoed in his ears, sounding far away, like in a dream. Was he awake? Was he asleep? Was it real? He reached for it and answered. "Hello?"

"You're not dreaming," a raspy voice replied.

His heart stopped. His body began to tremble, the phone shaking against his ear. "What?"

"I asked if you were coming out tonight."

He recognized the voice. "Tony?"

Had he really heard what he did? You're not dreaming… It kept repeating in his head, the phrase becoming a warped record, spinning and spinning, looping around itself in an insane repetition that made his head ache.

"Yeah, it's me. You okay?"

"I'm okay; just half asleep is all."

"You coming to Murphy's?"

Maybe a strong drink was what he needed, something to quiet his nerves, to keep him sane a little longer. "Yeah, I'll meet you there."

He ended the call, unsure whether or not he would make it to the bar. How was he to get out of the apartment alive? The horror that waited outside his door would surely get him if he tried to get out that way. The fire escape seemed the only option.

He opened the window and stepped out into the full dark of night, looking back to make sure the apartment hadn't yet been breached by the unspeakable stalker. The door still intact, he shut the window and climbed down the rusty stairs, dropping the iron ladder and made his way to the alley.

Looking up at his window on the second floor, he saw the lights flicker before going out completely. He'd got out just in time. Blending into the crowded sidewalk, he had the feeling he would never see home again.

Murphy's Pub was only a few blocks away. He walked, hands in his pockets, not making eye contact with anyone he passed, constantly looking over his shoulder. Paranoia had taken hold and squeezed until his eyes bulged from their sockets, his brains surging from his ears. Each moment of time that passed, a stabbing reminder that the end was near. Suicide had been contemplated more than once, but he couldn't go through with it. He didn't want to die. He only wanted it to be over.

Murphy's not far ahead, the soft orange glow from the frosted glass windows spilled out onto the sidewalk, inviting him closer. It had always been a place of comfort, somewhere to relax his tired mind and body. Hoping it still was, he pushed the door open and entered.

Tony was sitting at the bar, drink in hand. He turned to look as John walked in, a large grin forming on his lips. He lifted his glass in welcome. "You made it, you lazy bastard."

John sat next to him, resting his elbows on the counter.

"You look like shit," Tony commented.

"Thanks a lot."

"No, I mean it. You really look like shit. Are you alright?"

"Not really. But it's nothing a good drink won't fix."

"That's the spirit! Have one on me."

In one swift gulp he finished the drink. Throat burning, stomach warming, he was ready for another.

"Feel better yet?" Tony asked.

"It'll take a lot more than one."

Two hours later the bar became a waving liquid surface and Tony's ramblings trailed off into white noise. His head throbbing and thoughts numbed from drink, he felt ready to face whatever waited outside. Maybe it was the alcohol, but he gave not a care to the scrap paper that haunted his every waking moment.

Standing with some difficulty, he left Tony at the bar and stumbled outside. The cool, night air hit him and he felt freshened and ready to meet his destiny. He had no idea what the time was but the absence of partygoers on the street indicated happy hour had come and gone.

The door swung open behind him and Tony came out. "The bartender told me to give this to

you, said some guy left it for you."

Tony handed him a sheet of paper, this one different from the rest. It was not the cartoony child-like drawing he had seen a thousand times; it was finely detailed and drawn with expert precision. Its grotesque form sobered him instantly as it seemed to emerge from the paper into reality. The wild eyes, bright yellow and bulging from their slanted sockets, bore into his head like a drill. Claws reached out, hanging on wire-thin arms, inches from tearing his face to shreds. He could hear the low growl from its throat, smell its rotten breath, and feel the heat of its animated liveliness, ready to spring forth and take his life.

He released the drawing and let it fall to the sidewalk. It floated down, the creature inside still reaching for him, attempting to stop its descent. It failed to catch hold and rested on the damp concrete. Absorbing moisture the paper discolored and the inky creature lost form, bleeding out toward the edges, its body becoming a warped version of its former self.

"Are you okay?" Tony asked, his voice soft, his words careful.

He stood trembling, unable to utter a word. How? How could it have followed him there? Who gave the bartender the drawing? He demanded to know, needed to know. Walking past his friend he flung open the door and charged at the bartender. His voice shaky he screamed at him "where did you get it? Who gave it to you?"

Behind the counter the man glared with suspicious eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about. Why don't you go home and sleep it off. You've had too much to drink."

"The hell you don't know what I'm talking about! Who gave you the picture?"

A hand lay upon his shoulder. He turned and flung it off with one swift movement. Tony backed off, his palms raised. "Sorry man," he said, "just calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down. If you knew…" His words trailed off into labored breathing. Sweat glistened on his face, streaming down his neck. A crazed look grew in his eyes as he looked from Tony to the bartender, back to Tony.

"What's wrong? Maybe if you talk it will help."

John let out a vicious, maniacal cackling that sent Tony back a few more steps. "You really think you can help me?"

"At least let me try, I'm your friend."

The words seemed to calm him. He felt his rage begin to subside. "Yes, you are my friend. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, just sit down for a moment and we'll talk this out."

"I'm done talking," John said before darting out the door, back into the street. He ran as fast as he could, leaving Tony behind. Unfortunate that he would never see him again. But that's what it was going to take.

It's the only way to end it, he told himself, and it's the only way to go. The only choice I have left.

Police lights lit up the streets below the ten story apartment building and a crowd gathered to witness the spectacle. Spotlights blazed in his direction, lighting up the figure poised on the edge of the roof. A policeman with a bullhorn shouted up at him. "Please step away from the edge," he said. "We can talk this through."

Talking, always talking. Why do they all think that's the answer?

He knew better. He knew no amount of words could stop it. They think I want to kill myself, he scoffed. They'll see the truth soon.

He saw Tony in the crowd below. He worked his way through the people and began talking to one of the cops. They gave him a bullhorn. "John, don't do this. Just come down from there. We can help you."

I wish that were true.

Then the air rushed to meet him. He sailed towards the concrete below, and for a moment, thought he was flying. Despite the fear it felt beautiful, it felt free. He soared into the night, and for the briefest of moments, he was invincible.

Tony had to look away from the bloody mess. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he held back his sobs. He looked up at the roof, wondering why. Why had John taken his life?

From above a single sheet of white paper fluttered down and landed at his feet.

The End.

Lee Forman

Lee A. Forman has been a fan of horror literature and cinema for decades. His fascination with the macabre began at childhood, sitting in front of the television watching classic horror films, and reading the work of the great horror authors. He spends most of his time writing short fiction, hiking trails in the Hudson Valley, and watching old movies. He's a member of two local writing critique groups, as well as numerous online writing communities. His work has been published in Siren's call, The Horror Zine, and Blood Moon Rising. Read his blog at www.leeandrewforman.wordpress.com. Look for him on Facebook, Goodreads, and Twitter.

Cracks

S.L. Dixon

Physician: Dr. Peterson
8268-WCT29

CASE #30728

Cracks

By S.L. Dixon

I ONCE MET A MAN THAT STATED WITH AN AIR PROUD AND CURIOUS that he could only swim after consuming a copious amount of tequila, said he didn't even need the lemon or the salt. I never saw the man in the water; in fact, I'd only met him twice. I'm glad I got that second chance too, seeing him the second time gave me a chance to ask about his explanation. From what I could figure as I listened, he was either a liar or the alcohol relaxed him the perfect amount for buoyancy.

Why I should be thinking about him in my current stressful predicament might seem strange, but at the moment, I'm not in control of my thoughts, not that anybody ever really is in control of such a thing. Besides, the tequila floater is a nice distraction and I think I know why I've put the two things together; my situation and the man I mean.

You see, the man explained not only that he could not swim without the Mexican specialty, but also that he feared the water. It was irrational, he knew it, but couldn't help it.

"Sea monsters," he started, "do you believe that? Serpents, toothy fish, octopi, giant turtles, dragons and cracks."

"Cracks?" I asked, we stood awaiting a bus south to Buffalo, (heading to a much further destination) it was cheapest to cross the bus by way of bus and hop on an American flight down to Mexico. Back then anyway.

"Cracks," he repeated and stepped onto the bus.

A pushy woman butted in while I stood at the doorway, in her defense the peculiarity of the answer caused a stutter in my forward motion. Once on the bus, I wanted to enquire further but I didn't see the man again. Part of me hoped he headed to where I headed, but I didn't see him again for two years, long after I'd ended my social experiment in ***foreign land inebriation***. It turns out people don't love Canadians with such an automatic nature as sitcoms might have the population assume. Nobody loves young drunkards but other drunkards.

I stood in front of a store window years later, it was Christmas in St. Catharines and I was

killing time. My shopping long done and the man strode up next to me. Now, I am not from St. Catharines and the bus where I'd first met the tequila floater was more than an hour's drive north of any part of Niagara, but there he stood, next to me admiring the same mechanical Lego display.

A brown and red train followed a white track around a mock Central Park, a patch of plastic ice in the valley of plastic towers, little plastic men, women and doggies staged on plastic skates. It was lovely and I'd stood a while cataloguing it in my memory.

"Quite a thing, don't you think?" I asked and turned, it was then that I recognized the man, "You're the man afraid of cracks and sea monsters."

I don't think he recognized me, "Only when I look at water or look at water and haven't consumed a goodly amount of tequila," he said.

"What exactly did you mean by cracks?" The question had been a pebble in my boot, one that wouldn't fall no matter how much I shook my upturned footwear.

"The change in climate is shifting the ocean floor, cracks of cold emptiness draw in swimmers to feed prehistoric beasts," he said, he knew it was asinine, but couldn't help it, it was a fear, his very own and sharing it didn't seem to quell his anxiety. "I once knew a man afraid of children in blue shirts."

"Oh?" I asked, any story starting like that and trailing after an explanation involving prehistoric dinner plates had to have some kind of punch line.

"Yes," he said and I waited.

"Well, what happened to him?"

The man turned from the Lego scene and looked at me. He had a fine spackling of salt and pepper patches of whiskers jumping from his face without shape or reason. He exhaled a steamy puff, looked at his boots and turned to walk away, "The man didn't make it."

That was it. I called after the man, but sidewalk traffic swelled and the tequila floater was gone, probably forever, based on my current predicament, it seems undeniably likely that it is a forever kind of uncertainty. But, forever isn't a long time for those destined for quick demise. At least the pain is gone. Still, I'll never know.

The reason I should think of the man at such a time is just my brain frantically reaching for connections, I'm losing hold, coming unglued.

He spoke of fears, irrational fears and the reason I was so confused by the cracks after our first meeting was that I am afraid of cracks. Not the same cracks, but cracks nonetheless.

It didn't come to me until I found myself where I am, fine time for a life altering understanding of my psyche, but at least it came. My parents were firm believers in physical activity, both finished in the top one-thousand among participants of the 1994 Boston Marathon out of something like ten-thousand runners. Not something to sneeze at. We used to hike a lot, we had trails running much of the property, but it wasn't at home where I first found my fear.

The three of us travelled to the Elora Gorge to tour the caves, I was six, perhaps seven. I fell behind a moment as we strode through the cool rock alleyways. I called out, but heard only my own voice, echoed around the rooms and caverns. I panicked and ran. I followed what appeared the only possible path and found myself squeezed into a crack in the rock wall. I attempted to backtrack, but the more I struggled the tighter the rock held. I screamed and cried. My parents finally came back from outside the cave to look for me. It was horrible and my parents said I would have to sit in the car all day if I didn't want to continue. I sat in that stuffy old station wagon all damn day. They were serious about exercise.

After that day, I saw hungry cracks everywhere, it dimmed a great deal the older and more rational I became, but there was always the claustrophobic fear that a crack might appear and suck me away, chew me up and swallow me.

The actual fear of cracks morphed into dying between walls, any walls. I dreamed of rooms that shrunk and squeezed around me. I still saw the cracks, but they weren't necessary.

I told myself I was irrational but that didn't do much beyond making me feel down about my own brain. I considered for a while that I was losing my mind, but I didn't really have time, I had a life to live.

For more than a year, I'd worked on the lower end of the news spectrum, the kind of stuff where I had to handle scene, sound, video and news all at once. It's a tough job, but it's where

everybody starts.

I'd followed the usual starter stories, human-interest pieces about fundraising and heroic pets; I hadn't even had a chance to grow weary yet. If I had, I might've quit or demanded better stories, probably wouldn't feel every wall around me all at once, wouldn't know this predicament for real, let it stay a horrid fantasy.

I was busy rounding up streeters from the giant pumpkin patch, it was regular-sized patch, the pumpkins were huge. The patch is just south of the city very near the racetrack, cars not horses. I had three and only needed three, but I wanted at least ten streeters to pluck the best from, a streeter being a quote or two from the average pumpkin looker. It was good for the website, filled a space leading up to Halloween.

The sun had just gone down and the orange lights amid the pumpkin vines lit, I knew I was out of luck for any more streeters, but I thought I might as well shoot some night footage. It had a wonderfully eerie appeal and the haunted house would start up in just a few days, so I wasn't too worried, I'd be back doing my best fright-face in just a couple days. I wouldn't have argued even if I'd gotten to be a bigger time reporter, I like Halloween and quite enjoy haunted houses, the rubber spiders and blasts of air always give me a smile, I haven't yet been inside a haunted house than had the walls crack and close in on me.

I'd gathered all the B-roll I should ever need of the pumpkin patch and powered down my camera. It was then that I heard the swooshing racket followed by the gentle humming. I looked around and everyone appeared frozen, I couldn't see their faces of course, but they didn't move, all silhouetted against the glow of the orange. I turned back to my car to retrieve my camera.

Whoosh, I heard and felt a gentle breeze against my cheek.

Hmm-hmm-hmm.

I stood still and listened. Done. Gone. I turned around and saw the people moving again.

It's not exactly professional, but every Halloween, Tap Town Bar and Grill serves a pumpkin brew that I can't get enough of, well I can, but I enjoy it a lot. I'd had two with my supper before I went out to the patch. I rarely consume alcohol and attributed the strange feeling to an alcohol related brain hiccup; that trip to Mexico really threw a coat of whitewash over the party animal that used to live in my belly. One to Amsterdam shortly after, the icing on the vomit-coated cake.

I decided I'd stave off enjoying any pumpkin beer from then forward until after my shift ended. I drove home that night feeling not at all drunk, but suddenly worried I was well over my limit despite of my clear head. I slowed and inched into the city, took through the street rather than the highway and parked outside my apartment on the north end of the city. I let out a heavy sigh and gathered my equipment to take upstairs. Leaving stuff like that in a rusty old Toyota in the parking garage basement is just asking for the proverbial ***it***.

I was terribly exhausted and as exhausted as I was I fell asleep on my couch before I untied my shoes. I dreamed of cracks, wind bursts and humming, but I don't recall in what relation they mingled in my dreamscape. I awoke with a fresh hatred, irrational and strong.

The next two days I could hardly focus, I saw cracks everywhere, cracks opening around me as I walked, inviting me in where I might spend the last moments of my life wailing in terror. I could taste the damp cool rock against my face, I could feel the pressure as my bone crumbled and burst. It was unnerving and left me with a sickly pit in my stomach.

On the day of the haunted house opening, this morning if the clock hasn't yet passed midnight, I felt fine, better than fine. I felt strong and ready as if the story about the pumpkin patch were on the Pulitzer level, they'd never give the nod and I knew it was irrational, but it suddenly felt of utmost importance.

I got there early, interviewed the owners, they were proud and it was to be the best one yet, the same thing they'd probably explained to the camera year after year. They weren't the story and I was just killing time until when the real story kicked. I recorded the masses passing in line, it was near-dark when I finally went through myself. It was a terrible letdown. The haunted house could've have scared a toddler. I stepped through the back and the proprietors stopped me for an interview of their own.

"Scared the socks from my feet and didn't need to untie my boots," I said, a nice lie is better than harsh truth whenever speaking with small business owners. They don't buy ad space on

the website when they're mad.

They thought what I said was just terrific, clapping hands and laughing, a good old time for the couple. I patted the man's shoulder and headed out to my car.

Whoosh, the sound found me, a gentle coolness following.

Hmm-hmm-hmm.

I heard off in the distance. The moon was up and near-dark was pretty well complete-dark. I continued to my car, every fuzzy peach hair on my neck, back and arms stood. The dream was starting to come back to me, still fuzzy, but that sound, that whoosh and hum combination, led to something. What something? I couldn't place it, not yet. I quickened toward the parking lot, the gravel grinding below my feet and I thought of all the potential cracks between the stones. Crunching cracks, I jogged.

Whoosh.

The hum was closer and for the first time I thought a conscious being owned its voice, "Hmm-hmm-hmm, Peter, Peter Pumpkin Face, had a fear he couldn't trace." The voice was high and feminine, yet far from human. I'm not proud, but I screamed and ran, the camera on my shoulder suddenly feeling an unbearable anchor. I dropped it and fished my keys from my pocket.

Whoosh, the breeze wasn't so gentle.

"Hmm-hmm-hmm, Peter, Peter Pumpkin Ears, knew the end and found his tears."

Until the voice spoke I hadn't realized my tears, but I sobbed with the release of an infant.

Frantic, I pulled my keys out of my pocket and the fell to the ground, I felt around my body, whining and pleading, weeping and wailing.

Whoosh, the breeze was a wind.

"Hmm-hmm-hmm, Peter, Peter Pumpkin Nose, bones shivered from head to toes."

"What do you want?" I pleaded with the night sky. The moon rode enormous and orange like a massive pumpkin. The dream came back once I saw that moon. I rushed, sweeping my hand over the gravel. I located my keys and jumped to my feet. I hit the panic button; I'd lost sight of anything but the night and the moon. My car didn't respond and I spun, hitting the button frantically.

Whoosh, the wind that picked me up and launched me into the air had fingers, as I flew the voice called on my heels, I could feel her in my hair and under my clothes. It was vines, hard and spiked with horrid fat fuzz.

"Hmm-hmm-hmm, Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eyes, your biggest fear is how you die."

I screamed and felt my body falling toward the earth, the ground open, a bright orange crack, my body fell in and the walls closed over me, green vines holding me home within the cracks.

Once I'd stopped screaming, I felt the slow constriction of the cold damp earth around me, heard the bones in my feet and shoulders crushing into dust. The pain shocked me from feeling and I observed the walls crushing, closing around me, the whoosh and humming long off in the distance.

It was then that I once again thought about the tequila floater, then that I thought about his irrational fear, then that I thought about my own irrational fear. It wasn't a lot to consider and happened in the matter of a few seconds.

In a way, we were both silly for our fears, mine of cracks themselves and his of monsters from let loose from cracks, both on their own are irrational, but together, cracks and their monsters are something worth fearing. In these late in the game seconds of my existence, I'm starting to understand that, irrational fear is worthwhile after all. Fear of things unknown.

Cracks and pumpkin patches.

The End.

S.L. Dixon

More of S.L Dixon's work can be found on his website www.SLDIXON.ca

The Creek

Geoffrey K. Liu

CASE #13977

The Creek

By Geoffrey K. Liu

THE TOWN POLICE AND VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS gathered that early Autumn day in 1990 for their annual softball game. When Pfc. Victor Ortiz fouled into the dense greenery lining the creek that wound its way alongside the baseball field, Fire Chief Frank Felton chased after it. He found a woman's corpse lying face down, nude but for a t-shirt that barely covered her mangled private parts, one leg half-submerged in the creek, where the water eddied around that bloated piece of meat and turned it porcelain white. The woman, whose body was in the onset of decomposition, smelled like nothing else. The maggots had already gathered; he could see them squirming in what remained of her womanhood.

Felton turned his head and vomited into the bushes beside him. The sour smell of bacon and bile mingled with the dead woman's scent and made him vomit again.

"You okay, Chief?" a voice asked from behind him. He turned to see Eddie Bishop, a young volunteer, standing at the top of the brushy hill that sloped down to the creek.

"Go get Aquino," Felton said, his voice choked by the sting of bile.

"We gotta get this game going," Bishop said, apparently not listening. "Those blueboys are really cranking, and I'm sick to death of being called a fucking water fairy."

"Go get Aquino, ***now***," Felton said, his blood starting to boil at the dopey look on the boy's face.

"But Chief, I—"

Felton saw the color drain from Bishop's face as he noticed the corpse.

"Oh my god, Chief, what's—"

"***You go get Aquino right now, Bishop, or I'll run your ass up a fucking pole!***" The normally soft-spoken chief screamed, and Bishop's face turned ashen.

He darted away and a few moments later Police Chief Ken Aquino was sidestepping his squat, wide form down the embankment. The heavily muscled officer stopped next to his old friend and rival, and planted a foot directly into the puddle of Felton's vomit. His eyes

locked on the corpse.

"Jesus God," Aquino whispered, and for a moment his face betrayed his shock and bewilderment. Then he looked down at the sneaker planted in Felton's vomit, and the longtime professional that he was returned. "Frank, you contaminated my crime scene."

"Sorry, Ken. I just… she just…."

"I need you to go back up the hill, Frank. You and all the guys help me cordon off this field at all possible entry points. I need you to send two of my officers down here, Ron Wilkinson and Jenny Sykes, and keep the rest of them back. They'll all want to be cops today, but I just need those two for now."

The police chief finished his instructions, but Felton only continued to stare at the corpse, his expression grim.

"Frank? You got me?"

Felton finally looked up at Aquino and nodded. "Yeah, I got you, Ken."

"We're going to do all we can for this girl, but we need to do it fast."

"Okay."

Chief Felton made his way back up the hill, shooing back the cluster of cops and firefighters that had gathered there already, and began the process of organizing the area around the crime scene. He did so with strength and professionalism, and both he and his firefighters, as well as the local cops they had been battling mercilessly only minutes before, conducted themselves well. This was their home, and this was personal. None of them could remember the last time someone had been murdered in their little town.

With news of the killing, fear would spread like plague.

***

On the afternoon the young woman was discovered dead, Niles Acker was winning his first kiss in a game of Spin-the-Bottle. After the birthday party in which this historic event had taken place ended, the kids, all eleven- and twelve-year-olds, heard the news from one of their chaperones: A woman had been murdered in the local park. None of the children would be walking home that day, nor would they be walking anywhere alone for a long time afterwards. Their parents would be coming to pick them up; in Niles's case it would be his uncle because his single mother was on shift at the hospital where she was a nurse.

The five-block ride home took them past the park where emergency vehicles were still present and dozens of cops were gathered. Uncle Bob, who had also lived in the neighborhood for years, was in a state of low-grade shock.

"It's the damndest thing," Bob muttered, probably more to himself than to Niles.

Niles thought it ***was*** the damndest thing, but not the murder. The damndest thing was the kiss from Melanie Fletcher that still burned on his lips. She had smelled faintly of sweet strawberry that had cut through the musty scent of the woodshed in which they had played their game, away from the prying eyes of their chaperones. The damndest thing was how she had hugged him as she kissed him, and he had felt the hard swell of her newly developed breasts against his chest. The damndest thing was how she had slipped her tongue between his lips just a little at the end of the kiss that had gone on far too long for the sake of propriety in the small cluster of snickering, overexcited pre-teens.

The woman's death seemed somehow insignificant in light of this new discovery. The consequences of a murder in their town seemed vague and far away like a faded star. This was ***important***; Melanie Fletcher was ***important***. Even at twelve, Niles knew that his first kiss with Melanie would define his life much more than the dead woman.

"You have fun at the party?" Uncle Bob asked, his voice sounding a little absent.

"Yep, it was good."

"Any girls there you like?"

Uncle Bob was always asking him the questions he thought adults should ask kids, checking up on him to make sure he wasn't getting screwed up after his father had left them for parts unknown. It gave Niles some comfort. Uncle Bob wasn't nosy or overprotective the way his mother was; he was just an unmarried guy who had no kids of his own and didn't know much about them. It was almost easier to relate to him that way because Bob had no preconceptions.

Uncle Bob didn't think Niles should be anything but what he was: a boy.

Now that Niles had had his first kiss, was he a ***man***? He would have asked Uncle Bob about that, but Niles didn't think he would know, and this felt like something he should keep just for himself. To bring someone else into these thoughts felt like a betrayal of their intimacy.

"I guess, maybe," Niles answered with a shrug, trying his best to look disinterested. Uncle Bob glanced at him from the corner of his eye and, as he always did, read the boy's wish to end the conversation there.

"Yeah, well... just be careful. Remember to wear a condom."

"Uncle Bob!" Niles exclaimed, and then he laughed when he saw the sly hint of a smile on Bob's face. He laughed because it was funny, but at the same time, he wondered if he ever ***would*** get to wear a condom with Melanie. He knew what they were, of course, but couldn't quite grasp the mechanics of it all. His friend Jake claimed to know because Jake's family had cable television, and Jake snuck out at night after his folks were asleep to watch a channel he called 'Skinemax'. "Lotta tits on Skinemax late at night," Jake would tell him in a meaningful fashion, and Niles would feign understanding.

Uncle Bob turned left onto Niles's street and Niles sucked in a deep breath. The figure walking in the middle of the road was both familiar and terrible; his aggressive forward momentum propelled his wide, hunched shape along at the pace of someone with places to go, trouble to make, people to hurt. His back was to them, and the hair on the small head atop the thick neck was choppy, giving him the look of a modern day Neanderthal.

"The hell is this kid doing in the road?" Uncle Bob muttered, and to Niles's horror he honked the horn.

The caveman head turned slightly, revealing a profile featuring a sloped forehead and two small black eyes set a little too close together. Those eyes glittered with malicious intent, and a smile that was very close to a sneer appeared on the thin-lipped mouth from which two jutting front teeth emerged. One of the thick arms swung back, the middle finger extended in salute.

"Uncle Bob, don't--"

"It's that goddamn Hogan kid again," Bob interrupted without hearing Niles's plea. "Whole damn family is a waste of space. What's this one's name? Donny?"

"Danny."

For the moment all thoughts of Melanie Fletcher were replaced by self-preservation. Danny Hogan was quite possibly the most dangerous teenager in town. According to myth, at the ripe age of fourteen he had joined the high school football team and was promptly kicked off for breaking an opposing quarterback's leg on purpose. On weekends he scoured the neighborhood for stray cats to kill and skin--Niles tried as much as possible to keep his own cat, Howie, in the house.

Danny frequently prowled the streets, ranting at the top of his voice to no one. It wasn't just ranting, however, it was the way a man talks in the last few moments before a fight. It was how Danny Hogan seemed to live his entire life, only the fight that Danny was always about to enter wasn't some elementary school shoving match. It was a street fight that Danny would win and then he would curb stomp the teeth out of his enemy.

Danny finally stepped out of the way, 'fuck you' finger still raised, and to Niles's further horror, Uncle Bob pulled up beside the kid and rolled his window down.

"Real cute, Hogan," Bob said. "You ought to get home."

"You ought to kiss my ass," Danny Hogan said in that raspy, sandpaper grit voice that was like no other. It was neither a man's nor a boy's voice. It was something in-between and awful.

"You kiss your mother with that mouth, boy?"

"No, but I'll kiss you, faggot," Danny said, then pursed his lips together and made kissing noises. Niles's stomach turned at the very thought.

"Get the hell out of here, tough guy," Uncle Bob said.

Niles admired the restraint. That was Uncle Bob: as laid back as could be, even with the most horrific human on the planet. More than that, Uncle Bob showed no fear in the face of this monster, and Niles envied him that.

As they pulled away, Niles could hear Danny speaking again, but his voice was cut off when Bob closed his window. Niles only prayed they got home fast enough to avoid being spotted. He had never had to deal with Danny the way other kids had. Somehow they had managed

to mostly avoid each other throughout Niles's childhood, probably because Niles was not averse to leaving the house a little later if he saw Danny walking his street. He didn't think Danny knew where he lived, or even cared. Out of sight, out of mind. Had Danny noticed the horrified face in the passenger seat of Uncle Bob's car?

And, Niles, what would Melanie Fletcher think about you hiding? The thought came entirely unbidden in his mind, a taunt that made him whither even more. ***Do you think she'd kiss some wimp who ran and hid when the Big Bad came around?***

Niles tried his best to shake the thought away; this was self-preservation of the highest order. Danny Hogan was an older boy, very close to a man, and was undeniably stronger than Niles. The younger, smaller boy would never have a chance, like so many who ended up inside the wrath of Danny Hogan. Danny wasn't just mean; he wasn't just a bully. He was crazy. Even older, bigger kids, couldn't stand up to that. Not even adults. Not even Uncle Bob.

They rolled to a stop in front of Niles's house. Danny was still half a block back, stopped in the street, ranting and raving. He would speak mostly to himself, then his voice would begin to get louder and louder, until he was roaring. He'd look around and gesture and carry on… it was terrifying. Niles thought, ***How can no one see how crazy he is and lock him away? God knows what he's done***.

There were the family pets that went missing and turned up mutilated. These were usually attributed to the wild foxes that roamed the neighborhood, residents of the forest surrounding the creek for several miles. There was the unspoken fact, however, that foxes never did the kinds of things to these animals that had been done. Unless they were rabid, wild foxes would back down from domesticated animals. They robbed chickens and rabbits from the residents who kept such in their backyards, but going up against a dog or a cat? Never.

"Niles?"

Niles forced his eyes back to his Uncle Bob, who was gazing at him patiently.

"He's just a kid," Uncle Bob said, without a hint of understanding as to how dangerous that ***kid*** could be. "Does he give you problems?"

"Well… no."

"Then you don't have problems. The kid's unstable, but he's just a kid. His whole family's fucked up, they're really just making life more difficult for each other."

Niles could feel his mouth drop and his eyes widen at Uncle Bob's casual use of the forbidden F-word. Uncle Bob smiled.

"Don't say it, son, just hear it."

Niles's slack face pulled into a broad smile. Uncle Bob's use of the word 'son' always affected him. Uncle Bob was his dad's brother, and he had voluntarily stepped in to fill the void when James Acker had disappeared from his family's life without a word. Niles had always thought Uncle Bob would make an excellent replacement, even better than the first. And there were particular ways he looked at Niles's mother that made him think Bob would be happy to take the job on a permanent basis.

"Go on," Uncle Bob said. "And don't wander out of the house tonight. This girl getting killed is really bad, but it was bound to happen eventually. No town is perfect, not even ours. This thing will blow over and things will go back to the way they were. Until then, you kids need to be more careful, understand?"

"Okay."

"You've got other fish to fry, though, don't you?" Bob paused, studied Niles, then said, "Kissed your first girl today, did you?"

Niles was so completely taken aback that it didn't occur to him to try and hide it. "How did you know?"

"I was a boy once too. I fell in love a time or two and I recognized the look. Let me tell you something: Enjoy it." For no reason Niles could understand, Uncle Bob looked up at the house then. "Sometimes love goes away… but there's almost no time better than after that first kiss. It's a feeling that wins over everything, including fear of that crazy son-of-a-bitch out there."

Niles glanced back again, and this time Danny Hogan was gone. Uncle Bob was right; Niles was already thinking about Melanie Fletcher and her soft lips and the strawberry lip gloss he could still taste.

Lip gloss.

He looked at Uncle Bob, who was struggling to hold back laughter. Niles checked himself in the rearview mirror, and sure enough, his lips were slightly glossy, with just a hint of a pink tinge. He couldn't help but smile again as he wiped away the evidence. Uncle Bob put a hand on his shoulder.

"You only wish your old Uncle Bob was so wise. But I meant the rest of it, buddy, every word of it. Treat that girl with respect; she'll remember it forever."

"Okay. Thanks, Uncle Bob."

Niles climbed out of the car and waved as Bob pulled away. He glanced up and down the street, and in the waning light of evening, he saw neither saw nor heard further sign of Danny Hogan. Niles felt his mood lighten. A brisk fall breeze brushed his skin, and he shivered. Something felt different out here, but he couldn't tell what it was. Maybe it was still that feeling of his first kiss. Maybe it was the death of the woman. Those kinds of things were ***supposed*** to change everything, weren't they?

He decided that it didn't matter, not now. He fished his key out of his pocket and let himself into the house. It was dark and silent as it always seemed to be when he got home. His mother worked long hours at the hospital and that was fine. Niles was solitary by nature, more comfortable spending time by himself than with anyone else. Well, anyone other than Melanie Fletcher maybe. He could make all the time in the world for her.

He clicked his tongue for his cat Howie, but got no response. Howie was no doubt outside, fighting the forces of evil. Niles didn't much care for the thought of Howie being outside while the dark wind that was Danny Hogan was blowing through, but while Howie was mean and clever, he was also solitary like Niles. The chances that Danny could even get within grabbing range of the Siamese cat were slim to none.

The thought of Melanie Fletcher filled Niles's head again as he made for his bedroom, ignoring the note his mother had taped to the television. It would be composed of the usual lines, 'be home late,' and, 'dinner in the fridge,' and, 'love you, Mom.' Not that Niles thought his mother ***didn't*** love him, it was just that the two of them were more like roommates. The vibe wasn't cold, but it wasn't warm, either. It was just nothing. His father had always been the ember that kept their little family's fire burning.

Niles went to his room and closed the door even though no one else was there. It occurred to him that he would have to thoroughly clean his room if he were to ever show it to Melanie, and the thought gave him a pleasant tingle.

A box belonging to his father was sitting on the edge of his desk. It was an old and fascinating olive-drab metal ammo container from James's tour in Vietnam. Niles had found it on one of his household excursions, parked in a far, dark corner of the attic. Niles hadn't had any qualms about securing it for himself. His mother had an 'out of sight, out of mind' attitude about the absent James Acker. Upon his disappearance from their house and their lives, she had unceremoniously rid the place of all his belongings in one sweeping, apocalyptic event. The next day's trash pickup had been a whirlwind of clothes, some well-used furniture, a lot of books, all of the things marking James Acker's passing from their lives. Niles had snuck out in the night and saved a few things for himself, but he wasn't the kind of boy who treasured belongings the way some did. Much of the rest of it had been picked over by neighborhood scavengers, and what had been left had gone the way of dirty diapers and dogshit.

This box, however, had been overlooked in that cleansing, deliberately tucked away in the attic, an object that obviously had to be out of sight, but could not be given up. It was the kind of box a man kept his secrets in. Stenciled in yellow paint on the sides were some numbers, which Niles assumed to be the quantity and caliber of the rounds that had once been stored inside.

He went to his desk and opened the box, relishing the satisfying metal squeak of the hinges. He dipped his hand inside the container and pulled out a handful of spent shell casings. Although it was too dark to see clearly, he knew each shell casing had a date, a location, and a name carefully written on it in his father's meticulous hand. The locations were all various towns and villages in Vietnam. The names were almost all Vietnamese as well. ***Almost***. A few were French. Some were American.

There were well over a hundred shell casings in the box, which meant--if they signified what Niles thought they signified--that his father may have been one of the most prolific military

snipers in all of history. It was more amazing given James Acker had never made much of a deal about his time in Vietnam. He had given his family the impression he had been nothing more than an ordinary grunt. A few of the casings, just a few, had two names written on them. Niles didn't even know how that was possible. He didn't know how it was possible for his father to have gotten all of the names to begin with. But here they were in this box, along with some grainy black and white photos of his father as a young man, posing with his comrades in arms.

And the book.

The book had been buried beneath all of the shells. It was little, unassuming, bound in soft leather--or what Niles assumed was leather. The faded blueish letters on the front, written in some foreign language Niles didn't recognize at all, looked suspiciously like a tattoo, with the weathered, ink-stained quality that he recognized from his father's faded tattoos.

He dug down and pulled out the book now, savoring the feel of the soft cover. The book had fascinated him from the start, and though he couldn't understand most of the words that comprised the main text, there had been a kind of phonetic key in the back that had helped--

A piercing scream rang through the neighborhood, and Niles's blood froze in his veins. His heartbeat doubled, then trebled. He knew exactly what that sound meant.

"Howie? ***Howie***?" He clicked his tongue wildly as he dropped the book back into the ammo container. His eyes darted to the bedroom door, searching frantically for any sign of a svelte, feline body slinking through the darkness. Howie, who usually responded immediately to his friend's call, didn't come. "***Howie***!"

There was another horrific feline screech, followed by something that made Niles's blood thaw, then boil.

"***Come out, you little faggot, right now***!"

Niles made a dash for the living room. The thick drapes were still drawn over the big picture window, and in the darkness of the house, Niles knew Danny wouldn't be able to see him. He peeked through a crack in the drapes, then drew a hissing breath. Danny Hogan was out there, standing in Niles's front yard, glaring at the house. Howie's prone figure dangled in his raised left hand.

"Ohhhh, Howie, Howie, ***Howie***!" came pouring out of Niles's mouth in a desperate whisper. Just as Niles began to feel tears welling in his eyes, he saw Howie's wise, blue eyes dart to one side then the other, saw the way his little body struggled against this biological outrage. Danny had him by the scruff of his neck; the cat wasn't dead but seized up in that strange feline paralysis that came from being held this way. Howie--otherwise known as Howard Phillips after an old horror writer Niles had been quite taken with--was no doubt already plotting his escape and inevitable revenge, and that was good. What wasn't good was the rock that Danny held in his other hand, poised in an upward position, ready to strike at any moment. Niles would have to act fast.

His first impulse, and thankfully he knew not to act on it, was probably what anyone would have done: He wanted to call out the door, "Let go of my cat, you psycho!" He knew enough of Danny Hogan's reputation, however, to know that such an act of desperation and fear would most certainly have signed Howie's death warrant. Danny loved inflicting pain and sorrow in equal measure. There was no doubt in Niles's mind that opening the front door and crying out for his cat, ***begging*** for his cat, would cause Danny to bring that rock down on Howie's head without hesitation. The only good part about it was that Danny wouldn't strike until he knew Niles was watching. Niles ***hoped***.

Niles tiptoed through the house to the backdoor. He opened the door with painful deliberation, believing that any noise could set Danny off. As he crept out into the backyard, he realized he had no plan--although, that wasn't exactly true; he knew he had to get around Danny, to flank him.

And then what? What could he possibly ***do*** to Danny? Put him in a choke hold? He had seen it work on the wrestling shows he watched sometimes on television, but those were silly and fake, and there was no way he could make it work. He needed a weapon and a path far enough around Danny to keep the element of surprise.

Niles darted left and hopped the fence into his neighbor's yard. His eyes scanned the area for something, ***anything***. He saw a garden shovel leaning against the shed. It was short, but

had satisfying weight. He wondered if he would be able to go through with this if he got close enough. His heart told him he would be discovered immediately, thus ending Howie's life and, quite possibly, his own.

He made his way around the neighbor's house to their front yard, where he immediately slipped behind a large oak tree. Danny was still there, Howie dangling from his fist, the cat's skull mercifully intact.

"Come out here, little ***fag-boy***!" Danny shouted at the empty house, and Niles wondered again how no one else in this neighborhood could hear this outrage.

A part of him already knew. It was because Danny was just a little on the outside. In the eyes of someone he did not directly affect, he faded and wavered. How Niles came by this knowledge he could not say, but he knew it was true of himself as well. It was part of what made this situation so dangerous. Two boys, just outside the border of this world, waging their own war against each other.

If it was to be war, Niles would fight alone.

He stepped from behind the tree, keeping at an angle to Danny's back. He stepped as quietly as possible, although it seemed unlikely Danny would hear him over the sound of his own ranting and raving. Niles approached Danny from behind, hefted the shovel in his hands, and swung as hard as he could.

The result was satisfying and sickening. Danny turned just a bit at the last minute, but not enough to save himself the blow. He took the full weight of the shovel against the right side of his skull. There was a dull, metallic thump, and Niles thought he could hear the slightest crack beneath that, like cracking an egg into a bowl. Danny's hand loosened on Howie's scruff just enough to release the Siamese from his trance-like state, and Howie turned on the boy's arm in a tornado of teeth and claws. Niles could see red grooves appear on Danny's flesh, the blood beading from those primitive feline carvings. Danny screamed, though in his battered state it came out more like, ***mwuuuuuuh***! He shook his arm violently; Howie detached and dashed away. Danny immediately dropped to his knees, his eyes glassy. There were two dribbles of blood coming from him, one from his right ear, one from his right nostril, and Niles thought, *Oh god, I killed him*.

There was, however, no relief in seeing Danny Hogan's eyes turn clear again, because what those bloodshot orbs conveyed was rage, pure and simple. Death--***murder***--might have been preferable. It was to be one or the other of them, and Niles had lost his upper hand. ***What the hell does it take with this guy?*** Niles thought.

He cocked the shovel back again--did he, simple Niles Acker, intend to bludgeon this boy to death?--and swung once more. This time, he was shocked by Danny's quick reaction. The older boy might have been a lunkhead, but his reflexes, in spite of what might have been a terrible head injury, were amazing. Danny reached out and caught the handle of the shovel in one hand, and at the same time he swung his other hand around. The rock he would have used to kill Howie was still clutched in it.

Niles felt a tremendous jolt of sickening pain as the rock smashed his ankle. He screamed and fell back, kicking out with his uninjured leg, catching Danny square in the stomach. The teenager uttered a ***whoof!*** and fell back into a sitting position. Now they were at an impasse, both fallen, both hurt, but Niles still felt a sense of hopelessness fall over him; the way Danny had recovered from the shovel proved it would take far more to defeat the big boy. Niles had nothing left. His only advantage, surprise, was gone.

Except....

Danny's own foot rocketed forward and kicked Niles's bad ankle, and more searing pain burned up the boy's leg. Niles dragged himself back from the lashing, bloody thing as quickly as he could, twisting his right wrist the wrong way in the process. More pain. He got to his feet, putting a small amount of weight down on his ankle, testing to see if it would be able to take him where he needed to go. It seemed, for the time being, that it would. To Nile's shock, Danny got to his feet as well, becoming a hunched shadow figure in the dim light of evening, a huffing bull building to a final charge. Niles looked longingly at his house, yearning for the comfort and relative safety inside those doors. But ***was*** there any safety? Was there any guarantee Danny wouldn't just kick in the doors? Of course not.

There was only one way now. Niles turned and ran.

'Ran' wasn't exactly the correct term; it was more of a fast hobble. His ankle didn't seem to be broken, which was good, but it was in very bad shape, which was bad. He thought it could very easily ***become*** broken somewhere along his route, and then he'd be dead. He would have to take this step-by-step, foot-by-foot, and block-by-block. He had to make five blocks, and fast, because he could hear the grunting, raging bull behind him. He hazarded a glance back and saw Danny about ten yards behind. The older boy was weaving and swaying, but didn't seem to be slowing down. All the while, he carved a path of rage before him, his voice a chainsaw.

"***You little fucking faggot! I'll fucking kill you! Come'ere and take your fucking medicine, you little piece of shit!***"

The neighborhood swirled past Niles as he struggled against pain and exhaustion. Here was Mrs. Klein's house with the gnome statues in the little garden. Here was the Lipinski's house with the smell of boiled cabbage in the air. There went the Old Folk House, so named by the neighborhood kids, the big blue Victorian that was supposedly haunted.

His entire short life streaked past Niles in his peripheral vision. On his way past several houses, he considered making a sudden turn and running up to one of the doors, banging frantically, and begging for help. Surely someone would help him, but would they get to the door in time? And if they did, would Danny hurt them as well? Niles couldn't risk that, and even more, he couldn't risk backing himself into a corner without the guarantee of salvation.

There was only one place now where he could find that guarantee, and if his body could hold out, then he might be okay.

Two blocks to go.

"***Come back here, fag-boy! I'm gonna fucking kill you, I'm gonna fucking carve you up, I'm gonna rip off your fucking balls and feed them to my dog!***"

He could see the glow of police lights through the trees a block away. Thank god they were still at the ballpark; he supposed they would be there for a very long time. There was no way even Danny would face a load of cops. Danny was sly and mean, but he wasn't stupid enough to take a bullet.

Niles's ankle strained with every step. His wrist was throbbing and beginning to swell. It wasn't nearly as serious as the ankle, but it still hurt like hell.

The entrance to the park was just coming into view, and sure enough, he could see a half dozen or so town cops milling about the parking lot. Danny hobbled to the middle of the street directly facing them. To the other side of the road, the creek wound into the darkness of the forest. There didn't seem to be any cops in that direction; they had either done what they needed to do there, or hadn't needed to do anything at all. Directly in front of him, the road crossed over the creek on a small bridge; beneath the bridge was a favorite after-school hangout of the neighborhood kids.

He looked over at the parking lot full of cops. They hadn't seen him yet. His heart quickened as Danny Hogan pulled to a gasping stop only a few yards behind him. His beady little black eyes turned in a malicious glare towards the town police, then back to Niles. He seemed to understand where they stood, and it only made him more angry.

"You little ***faggot***, you little ***wimp***," Danny spat between bull grunts. "Can't face me like a man, you need all the fucking cops here? ***Little fucking pussy***."

Niles knew he ***could*** go to the cops, and they would scold him for being out so late on a night like this, especially after the woman had been killed. But they would protect him, probably give him a ride home. They would see he was injured and would listen as he told the story of Danny Hogan. They already knew all about the whole troublesome Hogan family.

All Niles had to do was turn left. He'd be in a ring of safety, surrounded by men with guns, men who didn't take shit from anyone. He glanced again at the puffing, bleeding thing behind him--Danny, who'd taken one hit after another, and each one had essentially goosed the bull. Niles could almost see how Danny was prepared for him to turn left, how Danny was prepared to wait for next time. Niles was on The List now, and Danny never forgot or forgave The List.

"Go ahead, you little faggot, run and--"

Niles turned right and hobbled off into the dark woods next to the creek. Away from the cops. Away from safety. He could barely hear his own voice as he called over his shoulder, "Come and get me, you fucking psycho!"

Now he realized how little he had left, how much the agonizing race had taken out of him.

Not only was his ankle a throbbing knot of pain, but his legs were on fire and his lungs were smoldering. He had turned his back on what could have been his last hope, but even now, his lips were moving silently, working to remember those strange, foreign words.

The woods engulfed him, branches whipped across his face. He worked to clear his mind of everything, all pain, all fear. He no longer heard Danny's grunts. As Niles emerged from the thick copse of trees and brush at the creekside, his eyes turned up to the black night sky, dotted with stars and a white moon that shone down on the water, and whose light felt warm against his skin.

"***I hear the crawling chaos that calls beyond the stars***," he whispered, the words from the book that had been hidden beneath all those souvenirs of death. Although he had not understood most of it, he had been able to feel the power of the words in his mind, the way they heightened his sense of everything, not just in this world, but in all other worlds. Niles imagined this was how people who truly believed the Bible felt. He knew he wasn't exactly outside this world, but he was ***between*** all of them, as his father had been before him. James Acker had walked a dark path, one he had no doubt found during the war, one that had allowed him to slip in and take lives unnoticed, then slip away again. Niles knew his father wasn't dead, and wasn't the deadbeat his mother thought her husband was; James was between worlds now.

As he felt the moon's warmth surge inside him, Niles was hit from behind. His head snapped back as some unstoppable engine drove straight into his back, knocking all the air out of him as it knocked him on his face. His left side was immediately soaked in creek water, but that hardly seemed pertinent given the huge weight that was pressing against his back, the hard fists that were driving into his sides like hydraulic pistons. With every punch, Danny was releasing a sound between a grunt and a moan, as if this act satisfied some primal, sexual need within him.

"***I hear the crawling chaos***--" Niles began, but his words were stopped by a fist that mashed his lips into his teeth and rang a deafening bell in his head.

"What the fuck are you saying, little fag-boy?" Danny said, and for a moment Niles thought he was asking a genuine question. Then another fist smashed into his ribs. "What the fuck, fag-boy?" Another punch to the side of his head. "***What the fuck are you saying, faggot, what the fuck, WHAT THE FUCK?***" They were just words now, Danny's own form of prayer to whatever gods of violence and hatred he answered to.

In a way, Niles understood. He had his own gods to pray to, and the words, he realized, were coursing through his head. There was no need to speak them aloud, he simply let his mind continue the incantations he had started moments before.

TALUBSI! ADULA! ULU! BAACHUR! Come forth Yog-Sothoth! come forth! TALUBSI! ADULA! ULU! BAACHUR! Come forth Yog-Sothoth! come forth!

Would it work as it had last time? Niles knew the god was weak after a long hibernation, long decades, ***centuries*** even, of being ignored, of being relegated to myth and stories. And yet it had appeared once already, appeared at Niles's summoning. It, or something else it had sent. The thing in the creek wasn't the god itself, perhaps, but something just as dreadful. It didn't matter. Would it come again when Niles needed it? Would it come to feed?

From somewhere downstream, a sound like a low, strident horn echoed off the cement walls of the little bridge that crossed the creek. The call was like a combination of a cow's moo and an alligator roar, and while it sent a cold chill through Niles, he turned his head to try and see it. To his dismay, he was suddenly blinded by creek water, his mouth filling up with the gritty, mineral-flavored fluid. Danny Hogan was drowning him.

I hear the crawling chaos that calls beyond the stars*....*

Danny wasn't a bully. He was a murderer, plain and simple. There was something about the word that struck Niles more than anything else that had happened that day. ***Murderer***. There was a murderer, a ***killer***, on top of him, and that killer had every intention of ending Niles's life. He was to become a newspaper headline, a statistic.

Just like the woman--only she hadn't exactly been a woman, had she? She had been not much more than a girl. A grown-up girl, yes, but the kind of grown-up in whom Niles could still see the child, the kind of girl he could easily have a crush on. She had been very pretty, especially running in her little jogging shorts along the bike path in the dim morning light.

Niles had felt a stir of longing for her even as he had called forth the thing from the creek.

The sound came again, closer this time. Niles could feel the call vibrating through his core, and as suddenly as it had come, the pressure on his head was gone, and he was able to raise it, spew out the mouthful of water, and struggle for a gulp of sweet air. There was, just above him, a piercing, primal scream the likes of which he had never heard before.

The pressure on Niles's back disappeared, too. He quickly turned over and scrambled out of the water, coming to rest on the mossy bank. Danny was standing calf-deep in the water, his pale, horrified face turned up to the thing that had hold of him.

It stood on two legs like a man, but its human characteristics ended there. It had nothing like arms; its torso was essentially bare. Sprouting from its neck and its shovel-shaped head were a dozen appendages that looked like tentacles. They were long, smooth, and moved with a kind of fluid grace that was both fascinating and terrible. Two of the larger of these were wrapped around Danny Hogan's neck.

Niles did not know what to call this creature. There were dozens of names in his father's book, many of them spoken in the very incantation he had uttered to summon it, but he had no idea which applied to his unlikely and horrific rescuer. Yog-Sothoth? Some other? It didn't matter; it was here now. It had come much easier than the first time.

In the middle of the head, there were two large, shiny eyes, glassy black shells with no irises. In spite of their lifelessness, they, like Danny's eyes, glittered with a kind of malicious intent. The worst part was the mouth, a huge, gaping maw with no lips, only several rows of pointed fangs running in a funnel. It reminded Niles of a picture he had seen in some nature book of lampreys, those jawless, blood-sucking fish. Except for the tentacles, and the two stumps that allowed it to stand upright, this thing could have been some relative of those vile creatures. This, however, was much, much worse.

Danny was making some noise that sounded like ***hurrr... hurrrrr... HURRRRR!*** The large tentacles were tightening and loosening around Danny's neck, tightening, loosening, over and over. The boy's face would turn blood red, then slowly begin to go back to white, then turn red again. With each contraction, his fists clenched at his sides. Even those precision machines of pain and destruction were useless now.

Niles wondered if this go on for as long as it had with the girl.

Then the thing pulled Danny closer, the awful mouth sealed itself over Danny's face, and Danny uttered his last ***hurrrrrr!*** It was as if some massive set of muscles in the thing's head clenched all at the same time, and blood geysered from around the opening. The thing pulled away, the mouth still clamped shut, pieces of flesh and bone trailing from the puckered hole.

Danny's face was gone. There were only two holes where his eyes had been, a smaller hole where his nose had been, and a black 'O' where his mouth had been, making him look like some horrendous jack-o'-lantern, and cursing him with an immortal look of surprise.

Danny still screamed. He continued to scream until he died, face down in the water where the creature dropped him. Scarlet red bubbles jetted from around his head for several moments then stopped.

The creature turned to regard Niles with its black stare. It tilted its head back as if swallowing some particularly tough piece of meat, then its mouth spread back open, baring its now blood-stained teeth. It uttered that low, awful call again, then turned and began to move away. As it did, it melted back into the water, barely causing any wake at all in its path, returning to the creek as if it were a part of it.

In some way, Niles supposed it was. It was also a part of him.

***

As Niles limped home that night, he didn't think about Danny Hogan. That boy was gone, sacrificed to the creek and the thing that came from it. He didn't think about the girl whose death was still being investigated, the murder that had rocked the town, though they didn't yet know of the other that would split the town wide open.

Niles didn't think about the book, the one that had so quickly become a part of him, so much so that he now knew it by heart. The book that allowed him to walk just outside this world, and take the power of the void for his own.

Niles thought about none of those things.
He thought about Melanie Fletcher and his first kiss.
He was happy.

The End.

Geoffrey K. Liu

Geoffrey K. Liu is a writer living in the navel of civilization between Baltimore, Maryland and Washington, DC. When he's not trudging across the corpse-ridden apocalyptic landscape of customer service, he's procrastinating on various writing projects, including an epic series of horror/fantasy novels that he swears are going to be awesome when they're finished.

Geoff's other short stories have appeared in various electronic publications.

Geoff is deathly afraid of scorpions, white sauces, and failure. You can follow his brain dribbling online at geoffreyliu.weebly.com.

Hunt the Geek

Benjamin Welton

Physician: Dr. Lotherton
8715-AED19

CASE #28228

Hunt the Geek

By Benjamin Welton

THE ROUGH PAPER WAS FRAYED ALL AROUND and smelled like basement mold. Stains overran the small card, and yet the central image - a bald man eating a light bulb while holding up two white mice in his right hand - remained visible enough. The card's current owner had stolen it from a dead man. The dead man had been a pervert of the highest order with enough mental infections to warrant his early termination. The circus had been one of his many obsessions, and this once beloved card had been part of a larger set of advertisements, with each card focusing on an individual attraction. The crispy, yellowed card represented the Geek - a ravenous freak with an ability to eat everything and anything all the while remaining physically repulsive to the oh-so boring boobs who came to see him every night in places named Springfield, Manchester, West Union, and Central City.

The previous owner had made quite a game out of this card. In his bloodstained journals, which were recovered from the scene, police found something called "Hunt the Geek." Hunt the Geek was conceived of as a life-or-death scenario wherein the contestants, who were all chosen well in advance because of their moral corruption and attendant desperation, would try to locate the Geek card by any means necessary. The winner was the one who made it until daybreak with the card in hand. Murder was allowed and even encouraged in Hunt the Geek.

At the time of his death, the official investigators considered Hunt the Geek's creator a rich sicko with too much time on his hands. They figured that this little cat-and-mouse game had never gotten out of the design stages. They were, of course, wrong. Not only had the "rich sicko" written Hunt the Geek into his will, but he had been preparing for it for over two decades.

The card's newest owner placed it upright into his inner breast pocket next to his cigarette lighter. He patted down his jacket, glanced at himself in the mirror, then made his way to the entrance doors. He hovered by the knobs for a few seconds before hearing the hall

clock chime six times. His oddly shaped hands balled into fists in anticipation when he heard the hesitating footsteps outside.

He answered on the second knock.

***

Jameson stepped back a little when Ilya answered the door. Although Ilya had been with the family since before the time Jameson was born, he still cringed at the sight of the hunchbacked butler. Ilya's wheezing, heavily accented voice, plus his uneven gait earned him the nickname "Goombah" around the house. Jameson never knew why, but he knew that it fit.

The flight from Los Angeles has been long and boring and the whole way there Jameson prayed for a crash. His reason: the blonde in the seat in front of him with the Southern accent and the terrible choice in in-flight movies. When not dreaming about a fiery plunge from 20,000 feet, Jameson was thinking about screwing her in the most violent ways. It would make a good movie, he'd thought, with the innocent Georgia housewife getting sideswiped during her first trip to the West Coast. Jameson would cast his biggest actor - the one who always made it hurt. Jameson would do his best Kubrick too, with thousands of shots done in order to make the pain perfect.

Ilya broke his stream of fever dreams.

"I trust your flight was comfortable. I've fixed up your old room in the east wing for you. If you'd like, I can start making supper now."

"I am hungry. Just bring it up to the room when you're done. I like eating alone."

"Yes, sir."

"By the way, when's the reading tonight? I don't want to be here longer than I have to."

"Mr. Simmons, your father's lawyer, told me eight o'clock over the phone. But..."

"But what?"

Ilya leaned in close and whispered his reply as if passing gossip in church.

"He drinks."

Jameson smirked. Old Goombah was still the hunky prude with the old world prejudices of a schoolmarm. He had been the one who had caught Jameson masturbating at thirteen. Jameson had been a late bloomer compared to his friends, but Ilya still reacted as if the curse of werewolf hands were about to fall upon his ward. Jameson had smacked Ilya all those years ago for snooping, and when the aggrieved butler told Jameson's father about his son's actions, the old monster had simply said: "good."

James lightly touched the newly washed sheets on his old bed. The room smelled fresh, with a hint of lilac and almonds. Breathing it all in made him cough a little. Well, that and the fact that he had been sick for as long as he could remember. The industry had turned him into a night owl, and his pale complexion wasn't helped any by a natural inclination towards illness. Even as a kid, Jameson spent more time in bed with a thermometer hanging out of his mouth like a cigarette than anywhere else. Now, with the lawsuit that daily turned against his favor, Jameson was feeling closer and closer to death everyday.

After washing his mouth up and massaging the purple and yellow bags under his eyes, James took out his worn duffel bag and opened it up. Inside was a butterfly knife that he had bought from a Mexican extra during an illegal shoot in Florida a year ago. The extra, whose name Jameson never bothered to learn, tried to get in good with Jameson because he wanted to film a few scenes with Natasha Barre, that day's star. He had twirled the knife in front of Jameson, making his hands pirouette up and down with quick repetitions that alternatively hid and showed the blade.

"A real killer, J. You could slice a real mean piece off with this girl."

James had smiled and said: "Ever put it to use outside of showing off for your boss?"

"Ask me about my ex."

"What about your ex?"

"She's floated all the way to India by now. Or what was left of her. I cut her ass good with this sticker. It was easy. It was fun."

"Now you're just telling tales."

"It's true. I did it, but that doesn't mean I'm attached to this blade or nothing. In fact, I'll sell it

to you."

"What's the price?"

"Either six hundred or three hundred and chance with her."

He had pointed in the direction of Natasha, who was busy filming with another actor.

"You don't seem union."

"No, but I got a cock and I can use it. I'll make your movie good."

"We usually make you guys pass the AIDS test before shooting. No exceptions. You wouldn't happen to have AIDS now, would you?"

The extra gave Jameson an ugly look as if Jameson had offended every ounce of his manhood. He moved the knife towards his pocket.

"Okay, you passed. Get ready. We'll shoot you in an hour. If you're good, I'll pay you two hundred. Consider the extra hundred as payment for the amount of cocaine Natasha's going to need just to blow you."

The two men shook hands not knowing that it was going to be a $50,000 handshake. The extra did not have AIDS, but he did have gonorrhea. His ten minute performance (multiple takes, of course) killed Natasha's promising career, and the aforementioned number was her approximation for the amount of money she'd lost in the last year. After killing his brother and sister during the game that only he and dad knew about, and thus getting his hands on the estate and its assets, Jameson made a promise to hunt the Mexican extra down and do $50,000 worth of damage to him.

***

At seven, Ilya, who had been busy scrubbing the kitchen floor and checking the pipes in the basement, answered another knock at the door.

"Goombah! You're still ugly as all hell."

Mark Antony was standing in front of Ilya in the doorway and his voice was clearly directed at Ilya, and yet his eyes were far off into space. His words too were slurred around the edges, with wet smacks that grew annoying after the second sentence.

"Please come in. It looks like it's going to rain and I've made your room so nice and warm."

"You trying to get me into bed, Goombah? You know I don't hang that way."

"Ah, yes. A jest. Very good, sir. You're room is ready and I've just made supper for Jameson. I can make one especially for you in a minute."

"Jameson's here?"

"Yes, he arrived an hour ago."

"Funny, I was hoping that he was dead."

Ilya did not respond and took Mark Antony's bags in both hands. He led him towards his room, but Ilya had to stop constantly and nudge Mark Antony forwards. The middle child reminded Ilya of a dog, no a puppy. He looked lost without direction, and Ilya even had to open the door for him. After placing Mark Antony's small bags on the bed and moving to close the door, Ilya looked back to see Mark Antony standing by the window with his arms awkwardly stretched stiff at his sides. He looked like a robot or an alien who had just discovered dusk.

Mark Antony had grown estranged from his own brain. The blows to his head had been too many, and now all he had to look forward to was the vegetable life that was growing closer each day. Yesterday morning, while sleeping in a hotel near the airport, Mark Antony had pissed in his boxers because he had forgotten why he had gotten up in the first place. He had pulled his legs from underneath the covers, stood up, walked towards the bathroom, then stopped. Standing right in front for the demarcation line between the bathroom tiles and the carpet, Mark Antony had released the contents of his bladder. The warm sensation had felt good, so Mark Antony didn't clean himself up. He simply went right back to sleeping.

Always forgetful, Mark Antony has suffered the most under his father, who had considered his second son "fully retarded." To their neighbors he was just "Tard," while in school Mark Antony was called everything in the book, from "Special Needs" to "Water Brain." His history of being slow meant that the team doctors couldn't easily diagnose his multiple concussions, and the alarm was only raised when a teammate found him puking up blood into someone else's locker.

For months, time slipped away from Mark Antony as he was kept in a remote hospital and visited only by the masked nurses who made sure the machines next to him were running properly. It felt like a horror movie, and even though his cognition had abandoned him, Mark Antony still knew in his bones that death was only making its final rounds before closing time. Some nights he'd feel the cool breeze and think that it was the icy bone fingers of the Grim Reaper, while other nights Mark Antony would dream surreal dreams that would cause blinding headaches in the morning. His hands grew numb one day and never corrected themselves. His mouth too slid further and further south, and now Mark Antony could no longer smile. His breaths came up as bubbles.

All things considered, the money meant nothing to him. All he cared about was playing the game. The game had been taught to him by his father in secret many years before. It was one of the few remaining memories that he had left, and Mark Antony was determined to go through with the game. If nothing else, the game would allow him one last hurrah before the final sleep.

***

Mr. Simmons, the stuffy little lawyer, arrived before Mackenzie. The whole group, including Ilya, were already in the living room when she arrived. She looked twenty pounds lighter to Jameson, who hadn't seen her since they put their father in the hospital. To Mark Antony, she looked like a vague shape dressed in white and denim. Her face was familiar, but thinking about it made his forehead and the lump behind his forehead burn.

Apologizing, Mackenzie took a seat in between Jameson and Mark Antony on the couch. Her large black suitcase rested at her feet. She took a drink handed to her by Ilya, then sat up straight when she heard the lawyer clear his throat.

"I never thought I'd do this. Frankly, I never thought anyone had ever done this. Reading a will in this manner, with these provisions, is almost ludicrous. It's really something more fit for a mystery novel."

"Dad didn't read," Jameson said.

"Yes, your father was quite the man. Very particular and very demanding. At the risk of sounding crazy, I can feel his eyes glaring at me right now. They're saying, "Don't mess up Bob or I'll kill you."

"He should've. Any chance that the money you embezzled from him is in that will, too?" Jameson clearly enjoyed prodding the little lawyer, even though Ilya, then Mackenzie had placed a warning hand on his shoulder.

Mr. Simmons shuffled his papers for no reason. Without looking up, he continued.

"The will is rather unique. It's by no means written formally, and I can't make out much of it. I hope one of you can enlighten me as to what your father meant by "Hunt the Geek." It's the entirety of the will."

Jameson, Mark Antony, and Mackenzie looked at each other in genuine shock. Hunt the Geek had been a private thing - a game known only to son or daughter. The fact that an uninitiated had spoken it aloud was bad, but the fact that each one of them seemed to know its meaning was worse.

Without fully realizing the gravity of the words he had just spoken, Mr. Simmons began to read the odd will verbatim:

Dear children,

You all have been a project. An extended, torturous project done because I was once bored. I never kept it a secret that I hated you all, and that you all were a burden. You, Jameson, have always been dirty and damned incompetent. I was not surprised to learn recently that you make your money in stag films. You're still that grubby little boy who once got caught with his pants down by Ilya. You've never grown up; you've only grown into your addictions. I taught you Hunt the Geek because I knew you'd make it interesting and far more vile than I intended. I have high hopes. Don't let me down.

If I weren't dead, I wouldn't let you play, Mark Antony. You should have been aborted in the womb. If you had been born fifty years earlier, I would've given your body to the eugenicists or donated it to some unscrupulous scientists or needy medical students. Your mental deficiencies are a sign from God that you are unwanted and unneeded. I only taught you Hunt the Geek because of your size and

strength. At the time I thought you'd make the game more gloriously violent - more brutish. Now all you can add to it is comedy. Good luck, and may the Lord never be with you.

And finally I come to you, Mackenzie. My only daughter and the greatest liar of them all. You've convinced the world that you're "normal," but I guaranteed the inaccuracy of this performance too many years ago to ever be fooled by your false smiles or your kind words to Ilya. I'm sure you remember the briar patch and what I forced you to see. I know it's never once left you, and that's why you've turned to those oh-so discreet white pills that you carry everywhere. You chew them and swallow them and pretend that they're your secret weapon for combating everyday life. You will not fool your brothers during the game, but I will allow you to use them in the name of sport. Just tell yourself that they'll dull the pain.

Now, for your instructions. After Mr. Simmons leaves, the game will commence. I'm sure you all remember the rules, but in case you've forgotten, everything but guns are legal. If you cheat and find an easy way out with a firearm, then you'll be disqualified and will receive nothing. Your goal is to survive the night. The winner will be the one who finds the Geek, and upon presentation of the Geek to Mr. Simmons, you will receive the full share of my entire life's fortune. Right now one of you has the Geek in their possession. Do try to find it, and please don't do anything that I wouldn't do.

"Well, that's the end of it. Strange, I know, but that's how he wanted his final will and testament to read. A bull-headed and exacting man. I apologize if his words offended any of you."

With that, the lawyer stood up, collected his papers, and grabbed his coat. He addressed the three assembled siblings one last time.

"I don't know about this game you're all on the verge of playing, and moreover I don't like the sound of it. But I promise that I will not involve the police. You all can hunt for this Geek in peace until the morning. At that time I will return in order to name the winner and start the process of granting them their just rewards. I hope to see you all tomorrow, but something tells me that I ought not to hold my breath."

***

The lawyer's exit left all of them in a funk. Their father had revealed the intricate web of his deceit from beyond the grave, and the wormy solicitor has been his unwitting accomplice. Jameson wanted to gut Mr. Simmons himself, but only after the money was sitting cooly in his bank account. Mark Antony wasted no time on cogent thoughts, while Mackenzie sat silently and tried hard to appear as blank as possible. Ilya snuck up on all of them.

"Coffee? It'll keep you awake for the game."

In Ilya's hands was a silver tray with white porcelain cups and a French press full of dark and strong coffee. Jameson shook his head. Mackenzie made no indication that she had heard him, while Mark Antony, like an automaton, reached out and grabbed a cup. He drank the burning liquid in large gulps. Each swallow saw him choking a little, and after his third attempt to put the drink away, he had to run to the bathroom down the long hallway in order to spit out what was left. Jameson mumbled under his breath: "Well, that's one down."

Again, Mackenzie played deaf. She knew that Jameson sat next to her with murder on his mind, and he too knew that she knew. He decided to play possum.

"I going to my room. You can kill me there."

Still, Mackenzie refused to move or even acknowledge his presence. Jameson figured that the mention of the mysterious briar patch had sent Mackenzie into shock. She looked dead already, but Jameson found no fun in killing her outright. He had another plan for her altogether which required the swift elimination of his idiot brother first. If the big dummy had the Geek, then so much the better.

Jameson made as if he were going to his room, climbed the stairs, then doubled back towards the bathroom after standing still for a few moments. He had the knife out in his hands as he listened to the door. He heard nothing. He slowly twisted the doorknob only to discover that it was unlocked. He pushed the door open while keeping the knife at gut level. The lights inside were on, but Jameson could not hear his brother breathing.

From behind, Mark Antony wrapped his large hands around his brother's throat. He squeezed with tremendous energy and tried to make his palms clap through Jameson's

collapsing neck. The smaller man fought savagely, but with each aborted breath, Jameson's will waned visibly. In a last ditch effort, he used all his remaining strength to force the knife backwards in a swift plunge. The blade connected with Mark Antony's hip, then, after the younger brother's grip loosened, Jameson turned around and made a slashing arc across Mark Antony's face.

The large man wailed in pain. To Jameson's disordered ears, it sounded like the shrieks of a dying animal. Knowing that his brother was injured, Jameson pressed the attack by thrusting the knife forward. He made contact with Mark Antony's shoulders and chest. The blood flowed freely, which only further increased Jameson's fury. The warmth of his brother's blood was intoxicating.

Mark Antony was dead, but Jameson kept hacking away. After severing a hand, Jameson stopped and stood over his kill. He allowed himself one moment of triumph before searching for the Geek in his brother's pockets. It was not there. The Geek then had to be with Mackenzie - his deathly quiet sister. Gone now was any chance at discretion. Jameson figured that the only way to kill his sister was with a full-frontal attack. With the blood dripping off of him, which made little musical scores with each step, Jameson made his way back to the living room.

Mackenzie was gone. No trace of her survived except a second coffee cup, which was empty. The door to the mansion's wide backyard was open. Jameson followed the lead.

If he had been more perceptive, Jameson would've heard the slow sound of shuffling that was then occurring near the body of Mark Antony. A pair of hands were moving the large corpse into a room, which housed another body. This one was older and smaller. Its cause of death had been poisoning.

***

Outside the night was cool and very little wind was about, which allowed Jameson to pick up every little sound. The family's property stretched for miles into a national forest. As a kid, Jameson had avoided the woods because he hated the idea of getting dirty. The only time he had ever ventured far into them was when his father had taught him several survival skills under the auspices of training. Jameson's father had taught him to kill his own siblings at the same as those siblings were learning how to kill him.

As Jameson searched for his sister, his sister was shadowing him. Her gaze alternated between her brother and the ground. Finally, she found what she was looking for. Mackenzie picked up the rock and heaved.

"Son of a bitch!"

Jameson's bloodied hand immediately seized upon the bruise that was surely forming into a lump on his temple. Mackenzie was somewhere within throwing range in the darkness. Jameson found cover and scanned the trees for his sister.

"All right, bitch. You know I'm going to gut you for that. You're gonna die. Die, die, my darling."

Mackenzie, realizing she had her brother in the right state of mind, stood up and took off at a run uphill. She smiled to herself when she heard her brother's feet chasing after her.

For a while, heavy breathing surrounded the forest. Jameson was no longer in any kind of shape, plus Mark Antony had taken a lot out of him. Worse still, Mackenzie ran like a gazelle up the steep slope. She wasn't going to be an easy capture. Jameson tried to keep his spirits up by repeating the word "die" to himself.

At the crown of the hill, Mackenzie stopped and turned towards Jameson. She stood still and waited for him. She said nothing, even though Jameson continued to chant "die" at her like a worshipful priest. The gory knife was in his hands and now its teeth were pointed directly at her.

"Why are you standing there, hunh? What did dad teach you?"

Mackenzie moved slowly backwards as Jameson inched closer.

"Whatever he told you, it doesn't matter. He told me that I was the one who was supposed to win the game. He designed it for me, not for you or Mark Antony. He'd never let you win anyhow, and I'm not going to let you win."

The taunt allowed Jameson to save his remaining energy for one last strike. After "win," he ran after Mackenzie like a charging bull. He got three steps in before falling down. First, his left foot hit the spikes, then his left thigh was impaled by what seemed like a million needles. Finally, with his mouth open, Jameson's face crashed on top of several spikes, one of which went through his eye and up through his brain.

The trap was a simple one that their father had learned from the Viet Cong. He taught it to Mackenzie, who was an enthusiastic student of traps. She made the one that killed Jameson when she was sixteen. After completing it, she had learned that Hunt the Geek was designed for her to win. Mackenzie never forgot about the trap, nor did she ever forget how to climb down into the pit without getting herself eviscerated too. She smoothly slithered into the spikes, pried Jameson's head loose, then rolled him over. She searched his pockets and even stripped him nude. She could not locate the Geek.

***

Because she knew that Jameson was dead, and because Jameson had admitted to killing Mark Antony, Mackenzie made her way back to the mansion leisurely. The Geek had to be with Mark Antony, but Mackenzie wondered why Jameson hadn't pulled it off of him. That was the point of the game, after all. A stupid move like that would cost a player dearly, and Mackenzie knew that Jameson wanted to win badly.

As she thought about her brother's actions, Mackenzie failed to realize that an open window was looking down at her. Inside of the window was a rifle - a rifle with its sights trained on her forehead. The rifle had been cleaned the day before, and the bullets, which were .30-06 Springfield, had been found inside of her father's bedroom earlier in the morning. Well, "found" might not be the right word, for the shooter had known about their existence for twenty years.

As Mackenzie reached out for the doors leading back into the house, a perfectly placed shot made contact with her frontal lobe. She went down hard, and the shooter's ears appreciated the sound of her body hitting the grass. Her dead weight would be hard to move, but nothing good in life comes without struggle.

***

With the house devoid of others, Ilya sat down in the kitchen and enjoyed a cold cup of coffee. He always brewed the best coffee, even if the family never complimented him for it. Ilya always liked to hear good things about himself, but silence was nice too. He enjoyed the sound of it, while Mackenzie, Jameson, and Mark Antony kept Mr. Simmons company upstairs. As for the Geek, Ilya had seen to its comfort. Cards, like humans, can get cold, so Ilya had made a small fire for it. He set it down to sleep here and there so no one else could find it. Even the police, with their trained detectives and sniffing hounds, wouldn't be able to find the Geek. The game had ended in a no contest, with the prize left for another day.

The End.

Benjamin Welton

Benjamin Welton is a freelance journalist, fiction writer, sometime poet, and aspiring screenwriter who also dabbles in Software QA and independent research. His articles have appeared in The Atlantic, Classical Wisdom Weekly, The Airship Daily, and others. He currently runs two blogs (The Trebuchet and Schloss Orlok) and has two non-fiction books available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble.com, and iTunes. He can be reached at benjaminwltn@gmail.com

The City Within

Austin Muratori

Physician: Dr. Lotherton
8715-AED19

CASE #92925

The City Within

By Austin Muratori

The willow hath sunk hateful poison
into thine dark and decrepit soul.
Somewhere deep, deep inside
a silver lining resides, but
not even a gentle cue could sort out
this unpleasant life.
Somewhere deep, deep inside
birds beckon the chance to humble
thy lives.

My soul shines a brief light
portraying slaves being worked until
there fears are cured
or at lest bled out through their hatred.
Somewhere deep, deep inside
reality is displayed as a reasonable
accomplishment. No pain,
but what good would the scars do other
than to redeem the past.
Somewhere deep, deep inside
there is good, but its not easily understood
especially by those who are one in the same.

Inside my thoughts decay the very existence
of my life, and tho thee hath trenched forth
through thick and thin one cannot be blinded
by the evils that stalk to kill.

Somewhere deep, deep inside there is
a world in which paranoia does not
express its dark side.
Somewhere deep, deep inside
there is a comforting place that keeps
me alive, but for how long I can't
foresee.

Inside my tangled emotions I wrestle with
Demented demons pulling my soul to hell, but
Somewhere deep, deep inside
there is an army of golden angels
guarding my soul with there bloodshed.
Somewhere deep, deep inside
there is a city within
one that hath no evil and good reigns supreme.
A normalcy that every sane human being has,
but I seem to have found that city to late
for now I am dead.

Austin Muratori

My name is Austin Muratori and I am 23 years old. I am a writer, photographer and filmmaker from a small town in Michigan. Currently I am in my last year of the Bachelors degree film program at Full Sail University. I am a very down to earth guy. I love movies, reading, traveling and spending time with my friends, family and girlfriend. My love for writing began at a very young age. It began when I was ten years old after being diagnosed with a rare type of bone cancer. The pain from the treatments was pretty intense, so to escape all that pain and negativity I got a notebook and pen and began to write. It started with basic journaling, I would describe my day including my treatments and what was going on then it grew to making up little stories in order to create my own world. In that world I was no longer sick and in pain and really that is what helped to pull me through. After the cancer went into remission I continued to write every chance I got. I always competed in my schools Young Authors Program and had a decent amount of success. I also really loved and still do love movies and I dreamed of being able to make them. I would hang out with friends on the weekends and I would write a film and we would all make it. Once in high school I continued on my filmmaking and writing journey by enrolling in every writing and film class that I could find. One of my favorite classes was Creative Writing. That was when I truly explored all the different styles of writing. I learned actual structure and was amazed at what I could do. I also learned how to write screenplays properly and took off with it.

I really enjoy writing short stories, poems, songs, novels, and screenplays. I basically love every style and am always taking on the challenge of different formats. I have been competing in the yearly novel writing event every November called Nanowrimo. This November will be my fourth year and I am proud to say that I have reached my goal of 50,000 words each time. Currently I am working on a compilation book of short stories that I hope to release later this year. I am also working on a novel and feature screenplay. My writing schedule consists of writing each and every day for a few hours so I am constantly working on a project. As far as film goes I have worked on quite a few things the most recent being a film titled "The End of the Tour" starring Jessie Eisenberg and Jason Segel and is due to be released in 2015. I also had the chance to work on a feature horror film titled "Moorland" which premiered on October 20th 2014 with great success. It will be released on DVD and digital download soon! Feel free to check it out on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/MoorlandtheMovie?ref=bookmarks

Follow me on Twitter @ AustinMuratori
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Austin-Muratori/288520727932695

For I Have Sinned

Lex Sinclair

Physician: Dr. Lichten
6428-SED41

CASE #95503

For I Have Sinned

By Lex Sinclair

You are not going to like me.
You are not going to like my past,
present or imminent future,
what is left of it.

My devoted wife gazes at me, tears
pooling in her sombre eyes.
This astonishes me, for unlike all the others,
she forgives my debauchery, alcoholism and abuse
I have inflicted upon her.
And now abhors her act of violence upon me.

Only now as I lay bleeding from the
fatal wound do I consider my behaviour
and my innumerable sins,
committed without conscience, nor reason.
Only now do I feel a profound guilt,
though that may be the wine.

Astounded am I that there is no hatred,
lust or thirst, though I am parched,
but only love burning inside me, as my weeping
wife leans over me, where I kiss and suck her
succulent breast, and instead feel the pounding of
a broken heart for my loss.

The blood of life pours from my severed genitals

that has destroyed many marriages, as well as my own.

I am the dagger that pierces the heart.
I am the gaping wound that tears your life apart.
I am the ocean that drowns the land; the lashing flames
from the hearth that burns your naked hand.
Now I am the dying embers of a raging fire that
has spoiled your crops.
I do all this whilst smiling.
Do you like me now?

Lex Sinclair

Lex Sinclair is the author of six dark, suspense and horror, science-fiction novels. He was born in Skewen, Neath in the United Kingdom. His short stories have appeared in previous Sanitarium Magazine issues along with the popular poem “The Scarecrow”. Other poems have been published in The South Wales Evening Post, as well as articles regarding libraries and book releases.

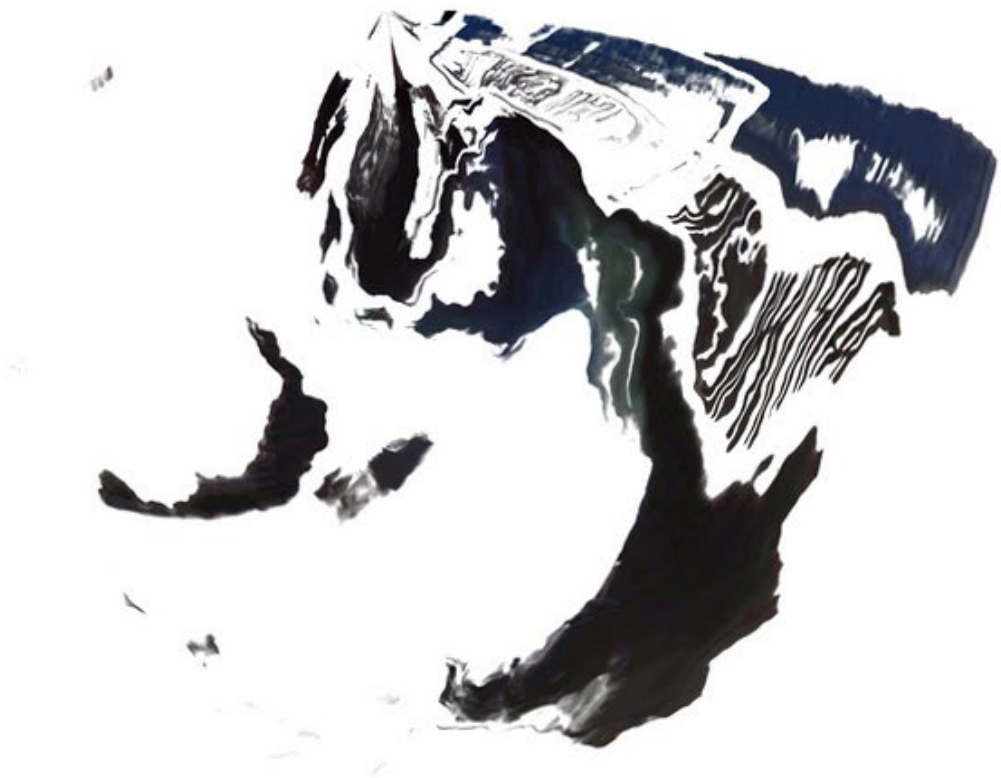
He has six future novels earmarked for publication by Permuted Press. He is honoured to be part of this issue.

Lex Sinclair is currently writing his “Don’t Fear The Reaper” saga.

The Withering Woman

Terry Miller

Physician: Dr. Edgar
9828-SJE41



CASE #21195

The Withering Woman

By Terry Miller

I awoke to the sound of birds chirping in the hollow
Peer outside my window to gaze upon a swallow.
The sky clearing to reveal a gentle shade of blue
Brightening with the rising sun, such a comforting hue.
I rise to start my day, the t.v. blaring down the hall.
I walk into the room and shuttered at what I saw.
There in the corner with a gash on its head.
A body lay motionless, no doubt she was dead.
Empty bottles on the floor, no one died of thirst,
Not another person around, a suspect I was first.
So I buried the body out back in the woods,
Packed the last mound of dirt down best that I could.
I returned to my home to proceed with my shower
And arrived late at work, nine o'clock was the hour.
All day I was quiet, not too productive was I.
Conscience steadily creeping, hungover, my mouth was dry.
I punched the clock and returned to my quaint, quiet house;
Discovered her shirt, buttons torn from the blouse.
Such a sweet smell of honeysuckles I took in with a breath.
I searched all around for anything else I had left.
Now all evidence was gone the best that I knew.
I sat down with a beer and cigarette smoke I blew.
My mind raced for memories, but I could not recall
No bits, no pieces, no recollections at all.
Who was this woman? How I wish I could tell
How she'd come to my door, or how she'd died, as well!
What happened in-between to the point of injury.

I entertained the fantasy, such a morbid curiosity!
Another beer from the fridge, ashes falling to the tray,
I twist off the top to let it rest where it lay.
The silence of the house made loud tickings of the clock.
I had a few drinks down when came the faint knock.
Rain was pouring outside, she stood naked and shivering.
Mud covered her feet, her blue lips were quivering.
Without thought I took her in, as pretty as she was.
Her skin was wet and pale, a bit shriveled as water does.
Honeysuckles still seemed fresh on her neck, the sweet scent.
Her body was cold but soft to the touch, then we spent
Hours beneath the covers, her body never seemed to warm.
Yet, I paid little mind as we made love into the morn.
Sleep fell upon me but I awoke again to the chirping.
The t.v. was blaring and my head was hurting.
I walked into the room and just as before
There her body lay still and naked on the floor!
The cut on her head bled as if it was yet fresh.
Blood trickling down to a stream on her breast.
Was I mad? I pondered but quickly resumed
To carry her to the place her own self she exhumed.
That day was so long as many others I did wait
To repeat the horror of lust we both did satiate.
Then I lost interest the more she reduced to bones,
Ignored the knocking met with haunting moans.
I awoke one night, her bones rattling my door
Slowly coming louder, I could no longer ignore.
She stood there smiling or, at least, it seemed
For all the flesh was gone, just a skeleton I'd seen.
An arm reached out to clutch my chest,
Digging deeper where my heart did rest.
It was then she tore it from its cage, still beating.
I fell to my knees in the pool I was bleeding.
Death lured me to my cold, quiet grave
In a place beside her own, for me, she had saved.
Now my own flesh was rotting, my vanity withered.
The bugs came crawling, and the worms, they did slither.
A frigid, boney hand soon crept into my own.
We rested there silent until bone was on bone.

Terry Miller

Terry Miller resides in Harlan, KY and attends Southeastern Kentucky Community and Technical College in pursuit of a degree in Physical Therapy. He grew up in Portsmouth, OH as the son of a steel worker and a loving mother, as well as, one of two siblings. From an early age, he has taken an interest in horror films and literature as he hopes is prevalent in his own works. He has pursued his love of writing both short stories and poetry since the age of fourteen. Now, at 38, he hopes to hone his talents to further actively pursue attaining published works in magazines and wherever these endeavors may take him.

On the
Record

GODMACHINE

Photo curtosy of http://www.sullenclothing.com

This issue we spend a moment with the super talented artist Godmachine.

We are so glad your artwork was featured at SCARdiff this year. How was your experience at the expo?

I loved it- nice to meet different people from Cardiff and know there is a such a great community. I got to see spiders the size of my hand and meet Dylan Teague again. And in a masonic temple!

You write that your art is adopted by your "everyday influences." What are some of these influences?

It would be quicker for me to list the things I am not influenced by:
nothing. If I see an old chipped wall it can inspire me to think about textures, if I hear an old friend laugh that can inspire me to draw something. If you are open enough anything can influence you. The best way to find something is by looking for it. Imagine how dull life would be if you only listened to punk music and all your influence was only punk. Try it, try looking at things in a way that it can influence your art/music/etc, you will be greatly rewarded.

What kind of clients do you work for? Who is your average customer?

I work for clothing labels and record companies and poster companies and do a few private commissions. My clients are often beautiful and awesome.

Some of your fans describe your work as deterring from the trends of the genre. What are the trends in your art world and how do you stand out from them?

I actually don't follow trends. Its a conscious thing. When i first started I got some distance working hard to look like other people.
Then I made a massive and conscious effort to be different and try new things, for months I sold nothing and it didn't look good, but then, after a while someone bought something, then people saw it and someone else would want something similar and it goes like that until people call it a 'style' and its popular for people everywhere to draw like it too. I try to never follow trends. I try to look at everything as equal and see where the wave will crash, then I surf that. If that makes sense. I remember no one wanting to use my grey on black pieces, but now you cant spit without hitting it.

Where does the name Godmachine come from? How long have you been working under that pseudonym?

There was this band I liked in the 90's called The God Machine. I looked in to it and loved the story of where it come from and the first 'god machine', the philosophy and concept behind it. It seemed to fit my non-belief and personal philosophy. I have been using it since I started drawing. I came into the game knowing people like Pailhorse and Hydro74 and Horsebites and Kevin Doom etc. and used to think how awesome their names were. I see a lot of Goddigits and Godlegs

and Artmachines and Satanmachines and its hilarious. Me and Mumford were talking about it once thinking how names like these are great but to be honest I think using your real name is better if you can handle and enjoy everyone's attention. I thought it was the best name until I was introduced to Imperial Wolf.....my god what an awesome handle. I like that people don't know who I am- the notoriety thing
makes me queasy and the selfie thing makes me feel old.

Digital photography and design is an area of art that has taken off in the past decade. What advice or caveats would you give to aspiring horror artists?

Ah someone else who uses the word 'caveat'. I like it. What advice would i give to digital horror artists? I would say work hard and makes sure your work is seen. Join blogs, communities and speak up, ask questions, take advice, be polite and work hard. If this is a nod to digital as a new form I would ask when art hasn't embraced a new form. Who could argue that some great auteur film makers haven't created art because they can digitally impose everything on after?

Or that when Chet Zar uses a computer he is less of an artist? I don't think anyone would think either one less or more worthy than the other- its just another tool. When Bob Dylan started playing electric all his folk fans cried into their sandy fannies as if it was an insult to their lord of folk. Don't listen to people tell you what is or isn't allowed or acceptable- some of the greatest artists today do the complete opposite and try hard to do what isn't acceptable.

Along that same note of digital artwork, do you still work with the old-school materials of paper and pencil?

yep, you should try everything, to be a good chef you should try all schools of cooking. I love seeing the artists I follow on instagram using new ways or producing work. You should all follow Sinteater (another good name) He is absorbing himself into the history of his art. I met him once and we talked
about this artist that did coffee mugs so we both did them, but now he is having his mugs hand made by a potter and he gets work engraved into slices of tree with bark....its just so damn interesting to see what he will do next. I have tried lino cut, screen printing, water colours, oils, ink and a few other things and to be honest learning a new skill is so much fun and opens doors to new ways of thinking about your current every day work. I encourage everyone to try new things.

Have any of your customers/fans asked you to inspire a tattoo for them? Do you have any of your own?

I have done one or two but I wont do tattoo design anymore, you can commission me to do a drawing but what you what to do with it at the end is up to you. Tattooists are some of the hardest working artists out there- they do in a day what I do in a week. I have a few tattoos. All words, I will not have any images on me.

You wrote in a blog post that "Sometimes achieving your goals is not the answer." If the achievement of your goals is not your ultimate answer, what is your goal as an

artist? Is there a point that you can reach where you know you've contributed all that you can to your craft?

some people find this hard to understand. If you have "contributed all you can to your craft"…. what would you do then, stop being an artist or film maker or seamstress? would you quit and do something else or would you try harder to better yourself and make something even more incredible? The idea that you can 'finish' art is not only depressing but only true for those that don't deserve to be an artist. My personal goal is to never stop trying.

And finally, if you could select a dream commissioner or client, living or dead, who would it be and why?

My friend introduced me to the Deftones recently and we talked about doing artwork, it was exciting at first, now I just panic "what the fuck would I make that was perfectly 'the
Deftones', and am I the right guy for the job". It doesn't help that I am a contradiction to what many would assume about me, My ideal clients would be Tom Waits and Harry Connick Jnr and Fever Ray…what the hell would I draw them hahaha.

Sanitarium would like to thank godmachine for his time for this interview. If you would like to see more of his artwork, his main website can be found here:

http://godmachinedesigns.blogspot.co.uk

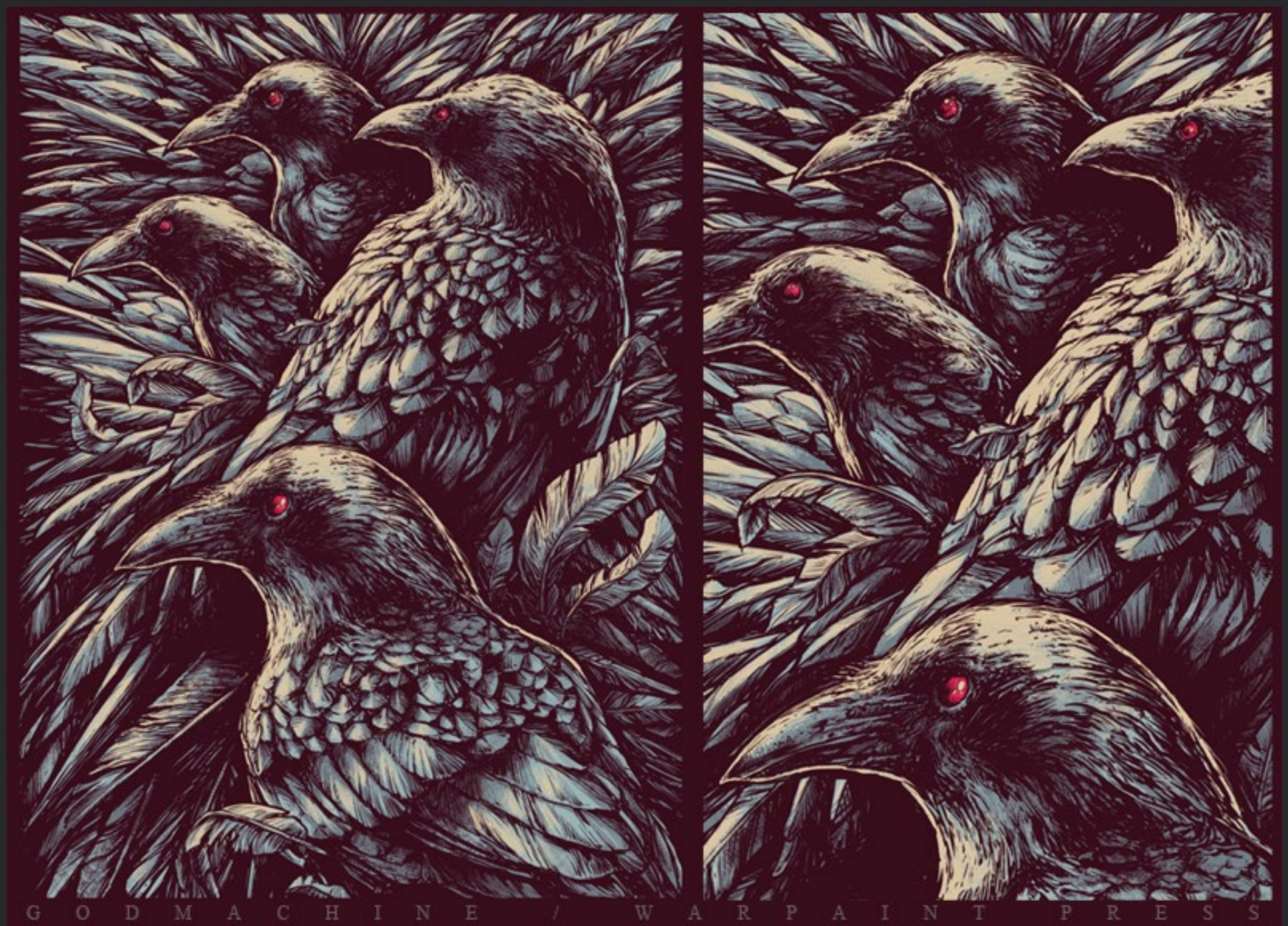
About Godmachine:

Godmachine was born in Cardiff, South Wales, it was a difficult birth; his parents were in London at the time. He grew up on a steady diet of nothing, 2000AD comics, Santa Cruz skateboards and old library books of Klimt and Beardsley.

His art is born of Jim Philips, raised by Simon Bisley and adopted by his everyday influences; film, literature and music.

He uses a wacom, photoshop and coffee to achieve his detailed images that have made quite an impact on band merch, skateboards and clothing companies today.

He owns 2 cats: Bear and Miss Boo Boo Kitty Fuck II and has a worrying amount of coffee mugs with cats on them. Although a vegetarian and a devout anti-theist he collects animal skulls, animal horns and crucifixs along with old discarded black and white photos.'

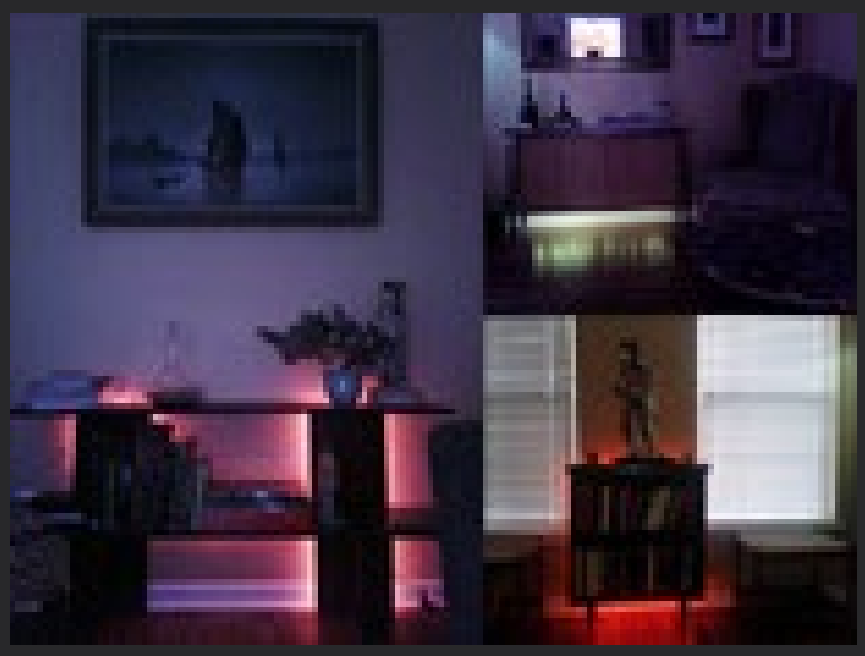


WHERE THE HORROR HAPPENS

JODI RENÉE LESTER

Can you describe what your workspace is like?

I have an office, which I rarely use. I do most of my editing and transcription work sitting in a comfy chair in the living room so I don't feel so isolated. I do a lot of my writing in my library/bar which has a nice, soothing atmosphere. When deadlines are closing in, I usually sit at my counter-high kitchen table. I love that table.



Do you have a go-to gadget / app or service that you cannot live without?

My laptop. Without it I would not eat.

Do you have a set routine while you work?

Aside from having a bottomless cup of coffee with me, never.

What is the best piece of advice you have ever received?

Read.

Where do you think the horror genre is headed in the next 12 months?

Publishing as a whole bewilders me. In horror, I think the micro presses are experiencing a cleansing. It seems a lot of them are started by authors who want to see their work published. While they may be making a valiant effort at publishing, it's not really what they were cut out to do. I'm seeing some interesting things from small presses like Dark Regions, which has started to use Indiegogo campaigns as a way to fund projects through pre-orders. Regardless of the amount (yes, even one dollar), all contributors will receive at least some version of the book. They seem to be taking a solid, steady approach to this to get out a quality project. I'm watching them do this with Madhouse right now, a shared world anthology edited by Benjamin Kane Ethridge and Brad C. Hodson. It'll be interesting to see where this leads them. I like what Journalstone is doing with their double-down series in which they put together the long fiction of an established author with a relative newcomer back to back in a single volume. They've also taken over the publishing of smaller venues, like Dark Discoveries magazine, which now comes out quarterly as opposed to bi-annually. As a member of the Horror Writers

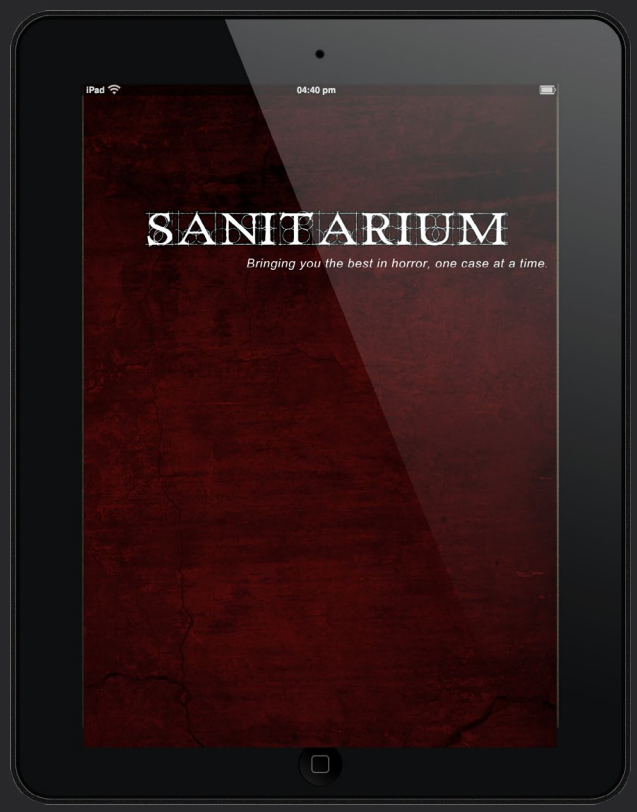
Association, I've seen what they're doing from the inside out. They've grown incredibly over the past few years with Rocky Wood at the helm and have been making great strides in dispelling stereotypes of the genre and giving it more legitimacy in the eyes of the general reading public. Where the horror genre is going over the next twelve months? I have no idea, but I think it will be an interesting thing to watch.

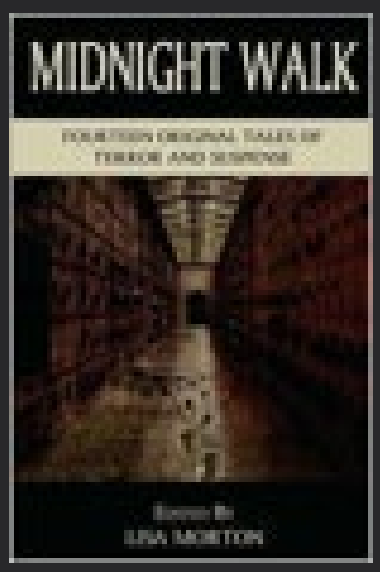
Do you have a final piece of advice for our readers?

Read.

About Jodi Renée Lester

Jodi is a writer, editor, and transcriptionist. Her stories "Casting Lots" and "The Guixi Sisters" appeared, respectively, in Aaron J. French's Songs of the Satyrs (2014) and Lisa Morton's Stoker-nominated Midnight Walk: 14 Original Tales of Terror and Suspense (2009). Jodi honed her skills as an editor with indie crime publisher UglyTown and has since worked with award-winning authors, mostly in the horror genre. She has just recently joined the ranks of Probably King as an editor of literary works that have been translated from Italian to English and, in her spare time, transcribes for Serial Killer Magazine. She studied creative writing with Dennis Etchison and is a member of the Horror Writers Association. She lives in the low country of South Carolina with her husband Mike.





ISSUE TWENTY SEVEN

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